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What does the 'Path to Prosperity' really mean?

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Rep. Paul Ryan's budget proposal, "Path to Prosperity," is pretty much identical to last year's Ryan budget proposal, also called "Path to Prosperity." Yet this time around, it is getting more attention, more outrage, more incredulity.

I am hoping this signals a shift in America's consciousness. It's not simply, as many commentators have suggested, that Ryan's proposed budget is tone deaf to a national election that rejected the notion of "shared sacrifice" that would cut Head Start, food stamps, affordable housing and education while maintaining tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans. It's not just about numbers. It's not just about programs. It's about a philosophy that is fundamentally opposed to the values and principles upon which our country was founded. Let's face it: We are not a polarized nation. We are a nation at war with itself.

You can read any newspaper, blog or magazine or listen to any talk show and see and hear the atrocities of the proposed Ryan budget (or alternatively, depending on the outlet, the "reasons" why government should "get out of the way" of caring for its most vulnerable citizens). I don't need to go into the specifics. Any reader has seen or heard them all -- children, senior citizens, individuals with disabilities, people with mental health illnesses, the homeless, people living in poverty, people without health care coverage (and even some currently with coverage) -- all are losers under the Ryan proposal. Who are the "winners"? The wealthy -- individuals and corporations.

This budget business can get pretty confusing, given that Congress hasn't passed a budget on time in several years, and in some cases, only continued previous years' spending levels (known as a CR, or "continuing resolution"). So as we look at the "Path for Prosperity" for fiscal year 2014, Congress is still finishing up its final spending bills for 2013.

The Senate Democrats also released their proposed budget Wednesday. It is most assuredly not the "Path

to Prosperity." It protects vulnerable citizens, including children. But for a compelling alternative to the "Path to Prosperity," take a look at the House Progressives' budget and a fascinating analysis by Ezra Klein. These Senate and House Progressives budget proposals take very different approaches to problem-solving than does the "Path to Prosperity." There's no argument that the deficit must be addressed. Everyone knows this. Cuts must be made. Revenue must be raised. But as Paul Krugman has expertly noted -- and it's something that hasn't gotten a lot of traction yet -- the deficit is not *really* as bad as projected. It is, in fact, dwindling. These things are not static. Existing policies are changing our economic outlook all the time; projections are revised; facts change.

Even without a budget agreement, the deficit is dropping. Obamacare is working. Fox News surprisingly rebuked Ryan's proposal to repeal health care reform. Or, I should say, repeal the costs while somehow maintaining the benefits. (How this is done is never quite explained.) Dana Milbank called it a "magical budget" and likened it to a Mad Libs game, a perfect analogy in so many ways. The country is not going to agree to turn Medicare into a voucher system that may or may not have enough money in 10 years. Or throw 25 million people off Medicaid. In some reality, somewhere, this might be called "crazy." Here we keep debating numbers and policies as if they are simply opposing viewpoints in our two-party system. Here we have a man who believes in Ayn Rand's captains of industry, was the losing vice presidential candidate, and now continues in his role as chairman of the House Budget Committee. A man who won't (or can't) answer a direct question about how his "Path to Prosperity" can in any scenario decrease the deficit without hurting the most vulnerable. He's all over the news, but he does not answer that fundamental question.

Which brings me back to the hope that maybe people are getting sick of the absurdity (and I would add cruelty) of cutting spending for poor children, families and seniors while adding more yachts to the fleets of the wealthy and of actually preserving the sequestration cuts (except defense) in perpetuity. Maybe we are finally taking a look behind the curtain and the "patriotic" rhetoric. No, this is not about numbers. It can't be argued on numbers alone, though the numbers prove Ryan wrong. But it's about human decency, compassion, the common good and caring for our most vulnerable. It is about giving vulnerable people a fish, but yes, also teaching them to fish.

The most effective programs -- those that provide jobs for individuals with disabilities; prepare low-income children for school and lifetime success; treat individuals with mental illness like people with any other illness who can actually recover and live productive lives; provide affordable homes; ensure nutrition and meals so families can make ends meet and parents can keep their jobs; provide health care to children and families who would otherwise have nowhere but the astronomical costs of an emergency room -- these are only some of the programs the "Path to Prosperity" decimates.

These are the programs that not only lead us to financial prosperity by cutting reliance of all these individuals on other public supports and far more expensive solutions, but also moral prosperity whose ramifications and reverberations simply cannot be measured. Maintaining these asset-building programs, combined with targeted revenue measures that are nothing more than basic common sense, are the true path to prosperity.

Those American values do not make an appearance in the Ryan "Path to Prosperity." It's time to call the "Path to Prosperity" what it is: a path to moral and financial destruction of a country that stands for and is built upon, hope and the dignity and value of all human beings. The "Path to Prosperity" does not merit valid political/policy debate. It is the philosophy behind it that should be debated, very honestly and very explicitly.

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