

## Taxes: Another View

This time of year, many Americans' minds turn to the looming April 15<sup>th</sup> tax filing deadline. And in this season of tempestuous tea parties, some of you may be tempted to give this anger thing a try, and join the chorus of those who believe—despite recent tax cuts—that they are taxed enough already. But it may help to think of taxes just a bit differently.

Granted, taxes are like paying the bills, and nobody likes to do that. But it is important to remember that taxes are ultimately an affirmation that we live in community, and that as much as we want to be left alone to do our own things, we necessarily rely on others even for that.

Even a society as individualistic as ours—that wants the government limited and out of the way—relies on government to guarantee each citizen's rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In short, we can't satisfy these rights by ourselves. In today's world, we inevitably rely on a certain degree of community support for the individual, and for that, we need tax money. Taxes fund armies and criminal justice systems—those institutions that provide order in society to allow individual freedom. Equal opportunity to pursue one's own happiness relies on a good system of education. It also relies on a relative degree of health. And access to health care—along with a good public health system—is one of the main determinants of health and well-being.

A 2009 United Nations report examined what it called the human development index. It goes beyond a society's economic productivity to examine broader measures of well-being, namely, living a long and healthy life, being educated, and having a decent standard of living. Number one on the list of 182 countries was Norway. Norway has a top income tax rate of 47.8 percent, as well as a value-added tax on products purchased. It has no national debt. The United States, by the way, was thirteenth, with a top tax rate of 35 percent.

To be sure, higher taxes don't necessarily make for greater well-being. How the government spends taxes is also important, and some anger here may be justifiable. Government often wastes *some* revenue through poor choices and inevitable inefficiencies, but so does the private sector. Administrative costs for health care, to stay with the issue of the day, can be ten times as high in the private sector than in Medicare.

One reason many people are apparently angry these days is their belief that the government is spending tax dollars on big entitlements *like* health care, which some people claim we cannot afford. But of all things to spend tax dollars on, this one should be toward the top of the list, given the central role of health care in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And unlike the Iraq war, the new health care law actually asks people to pay for it, which I believe is called fiscal responsibility. Those who will face increased taxes are largely the wealthiest Americans. A 2005 Gallup poll found that about two-thirds of Americans believe that upper-income people pay too little in taxes. Hence, the new law asks wealthier citizens to pay more to meet a social responsibility, which would also help save the lives of about 45,000 people who would otherwise die per year from lack of health insurance. This is what ethicists would call the moral obligation of making an easy rescue.

Some people are angry that their tax dollars go to things they don't like or find immoral, as we saw in recent debates about funding for abortions. I would prefer that my tax dollars didn't fund wars. But that's the reality of life in community: we cannot always get what we as individuals want, or avoid a certain complicity with the moral tradeoffs that necessarily define life in a community with diverse values.

Finally, we also face the responsibility of paying down a \$12.6 trillion dollar national debt—something that will undoubtedly require higher revenues and lower expenditures. As columnist Tom Friedman notes, for this to happen we'll need Republicans to help raise taxes and Democrats to help cut nonessential services—a tall order if there ever was one.

Yes, taxes remind us that we're all in this together, and that we'd better have politicians who recognize that, rather than cling angrily to ideology. So as you pay your taxes this year, think not of how much less you have to serve your own needs, think of how much your needs are already served by our collective life in this wonderful country of ours. But more than that, think of the responsibilities we have to the country, and to each other, even if it is a bit like paying the bills.

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