

## Sacrifice and the American Character

Two issues dominating the recent political scene pose real questions about the state of the American moral character. First, many people object to the provision in the recent health care reform act that requires all Americans to carry some kind of health insurance. The second issue is whether tax cuts should be extended for couples earning more than \$250,000 per year. These two debates largely come down to a division between, on the one hand, a belief in resisting government requirements that impose on your resources and, on the other hand, individual responsibility to sacrifice for the common good. While each value sometimes has merit, *this* time in history should prompt us to reflect whether sacrifice isn't the quality of character we should fight harder to assert.

Let's look at the health care requirement first. Polls indicate that the greatest objection to the health care reform act is the requirement to purchase health insurance or face a financial penalty. Why is the requirement there? It boils down to this: the larger the insurance pool, the lower health care costs will be because the expenses for the sickest among us will be distributed across the premiums of more people. As it stands, health insurance companies have an incentive not to cover people who actually need health care because doing so lowers their profits. Instead, for all to be better off, some of us will need to sacrifice.

Opponents of the provision resist such government mandates. This value is also engrained in the American character, and we're often right at least to question obligations imposed on us from without. But rather than simply oppose the health insurance requirement on this principle alone, we should ask ourselves whether the legal obligation to sacrifice for the sake of more universal health care is actually also our moral obligation to our fellow Americans anyway. I believe the answer is yes.

A second illustration of the American character emerges from the argument over tax cuts for the wealthiest citizens. Extending this tax cut will add roughly \$700 billion dollars to the national debt, imposing burdens on current and future generations. This challenges ideas of fairness; namely, that those who have more and who benefit most from current social arrangements should contribute more to ensure the general welfare.

One counterargument is that the government is taking money that justly belongs to the taxpayer. But taxation of any kind is ultimately all about sacrifice for the common good—at least it should be. Both health care reform requirements and suspending tax cuts for the wealthy pose to us, then, a basic question: can our character as a people make room any longer for the idea that those who have should sacrifice for those who don't, and ultimately for the common good that benefits all?

Politically, pitching fear of government and short-term economic self-interest is easy, and we see it all the time. According to certain economic and political philosophies, those can be acceptable and even necessary values. But the problems facing our country now are more substantial than we've faced in a long time, making it far too easy to say that policies are OK so long as I get mine. Political philosophy sometimes conveniently disguises self-interest.

Somewhere along the way, political leadership of both parties has avoided calling for sacrifice for fear that doing so will be used against them by the political opposition. That we let them succeed is damning. But who can reasonably deny that both our material prosperity and our moral character will ultimately *require* sacrifice? True moral responsibility requires leaders willing actually to specify exactly how they're going to balance the budget, for example, rather than offer the standard, vague ideologies and anti-government slogans designed to win campaigns.

Using voting as a means to express emotion may feel good in the voting booth, but it solves nothing. In fact, if current predictions for the upcoming election prove correct, the result will be more gridlock than ever, less civility in politics, and less of a chance to resolve the major problems that require the cooperation necessary if we're to have any chance at all of regaining our strength, materially and morally.

The toughest times in history make it easier to abandon good sense and to privilege self-interest. They are also opportunities when sacrifice for something greater than the self can become our strongest virtue. As columnist David Brooks argues, what we need is a political movement that is not simply more, more, more, or less, less, less. We can't simply be *against* the government, or for it. It is who we are. So, we the people have to be willing to say "this, but not that." Obtaining sacrifice from those who have means is harder than offering self-interest. But that's where we are, and it's time that we look for leaders who reflect the moral leadership necessary to get us there.

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