

## Once Upon a Time

Mark J. Hanson, KUFM Commentary

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Some people might say it was a grand old party, once upon a time. Remember when Teddy Roosevelt showed us how being conservative actually meant wilderness conservation. Remember when the income of the wealthiest Americans was taxed at 90 percent,<sup>i</sup> under President Eisenhower, who wisely argued that “every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies . . . a theft from those who hunger and are not fed.”<sup>ii</sup> Republicans in Wisconsin worked *with* Democratic Governor Gaylord Nelson in 1959 to *extend* collective bargaining rights to municipal workers.<sup>iii</sup> Later, President Nixon created the Environmental Protection Agency; he then pushed for universal health insurance for all Americans. President Bush the First raised taxes to help reduce the national debt.

But something happened on the way to the Tea Party. President Reagan redistributed America’s wealth toward the rich. He cut the top tax rates from 70 to 28 percent, ballooned the defense budget, and slashed social programs, while the deficit soared.

Apparently the best way to push political ideology and enrich the wealthy *now* is fear. We hear about all sorts of scary things— weapons of mass destruction, wolves, and socialists. Scaring people about debt is the latest example of what columnist Naomi Klein calls “the shock doctrine,” the idea that creating and calling something a crisis scares people and produces an opportunity to consolidate power and push an ideological agenda.<sup>iv</sup>

The 9/11 attacks, for example, led to the Patriot Act and two wars that cost the taxpayer more than \$1 trillion dollars.<sup>v</sup> Remember when Dick Cheney said that “deficits don’t matter”?<sup>vi</sup> They didn’t when he needed us to spend billions on the Iraq war. But now they’re scary. Why? Because if we’re facing an economic crisis, then all sorts of measures can be pushed through. Governor Walker of Wisconsin, for example, didn’t campaign to break public unions, but once elected, he did so in the name of facing a fiscal crisis. Never mind that stripping collective bargaining rights was not directly related to his budget shortfall. Never mind that most of *his* budget deficit was caused by \$117 million dollars in tax breaks that *he* put into place.<sup>vii</sup> So when Speaker of the House John Boehner was asked why he didn’t want to stop cuts for a low-income heating assistance program, he responded, “We’re broke.”<sup>viii</sup>

The problem is, we’re no more broke than the family with a big mortgage and credit card payments. We’re the wealthiest country on the planet; but the money is not where it should be. Where is it? It turns out that the 400 wealthiest individual Americans have more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of the entire American population.<sup>ix</sup> Corporations are sitting on record profits.<sup>x</sup> General Electric reported profits of \$14.2 billion dollars last year and paid absolutely nothing in U.S. taxes.<sup>xi</sup> In fact, it claimed a tax benefit of \$3.2 billion. Even President Reagan, once upon a time, was outraged enough to close the corporate loopholes that allowed GE’s tax benefit, but George W. Bush helped turn that around.

So as the federal government, Montana, and states everywhere fight over their budgets, we're told that we have to cut education and human services because we face a budget crisis. Montana Republicans are turning aside federal money which could have helped fund food stamps, programs for the poor and disabled, and family planning—with no cost to the state, and with no reduction of the federal debt. The legislature is also rejecting many other revenue proposals that would help schools and our most vulnerable citizens.<sup>xii</sup>

So ignoring our best history, we now get state or national efforts to undermine conservation, extend tax breaks for the wealthy, bust unions, eliminate the Environmental Protection Agency, and repeal health care coverage for the uninsured, while rejecting revenue sources that violate ideology.

But we *can* meet our obligations. If we can spend a million dollars a pop on cruise missiles we launch into Libya, we should be able to rescue our own children as well. The question we have to ask ourselves is whether we have the determination to do what is right and put people over ideological purity, greed, and corporate power. Rather than cave into fear and put our political thinking on the autopilot of ideological slogans, we must decide who we really are as Montanans and as Americans.

Fiscal responsibility at the expense of the poor and those who serve them, while asking no more from those who have benefited most, is irresponsible. Fiscal responsibility that demands that people actually sacrifice on behalf of the common good is called justice. Perhaps we need to recall the best values of our all our political traditions, from once upon a time.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics, at the University of Montana.

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<sup>i</sup> Politifact.com, <http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2010/sep/22/barack-obama/barack-obama-says-taxes-are-lower-today-under-reag/>, accessed March 30, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Dwight David Eisenhower, "The Chance for Peace," speech given to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Apr. 16, 1953.

<sup>iii</sup> William Cronin, "Wisconsin's Radical Break," *New York Times*, March 21, 2011.

<sup>iv</sup> Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

<sup>v</sup> Congressional Research Service, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other War on Terror Operations since 9/11," <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>, accessed March 30, 2011.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Kuttner, "What Killed Off the GOP Deficit Hawks?" *Bloomberg Business Week*, December 27, 2004.

<sup>vii</sup> Editorial, "Governor Walker's Pretext," *New York Times*, February 17, 2011.

<sup>viii</sup> Politico.com, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0211/49244.html>, accessed March 30, 2011.

<sup>ix</sup> Politifact.com, <http://www.politifact.com/wisconsin/statements/2011/mar/10/michael-moore/michael-moore-says-400-americans-have-more-wealth/>, accessed March 30, 2011.

<sup>x</sup> Catherine Rampell, "Corporate Profits were the Highest on Record Last Quarter," *New York Times*, November 23, 2010.

<sup>xi</sup> David Kocieniewski, "G.E.'s Strategies Let It Avoid Taxes Altogether," *New York Times*, March 24, 2011.

<sup>xii</sup> For information on Montana's budget, see the Montana Budget and Policy Center, [www.montanabudget.org](http://www.montanabudget.org).