

Everyday Ethics

Radio Commentary on KUFM
Montana Public Radio



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The University of Montana

A Different Country

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A February 27th editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* reflected on the significant change of course charted by President Obama's new ten-year budget proposal. After the usual conservative handwringing about enlarging the power of government, the editorial concluded that "Republicans have an obligation to insist on a long and considerable debate on all of this, lest Americans discover in a year or two that they live in a very different country." The *Journal* editors are right to insist on debate, but why should we assume that a very different country is such a bad thing?

At the end of Bill Clinton's time in office, the U.S. government was generating an annual fiscal surplus. The entire long-term debt was on track to be eliminated by 2009. Had we paid down the debt over the last eight years, the United States would now be debt-free and have ample resources for dealing with any economic downturn and for funding such urgent priorities as universal health care and rebuilding infrastructure. Instead, we elected an administration that promised to "give us our money back," because, as many politicians are fond of saying, you know better how to spend your money than Washington does. The problem was, however, that much of the budget surplus was directed to the wealthiest Americans—a massive redistribution of wealth upward—and urgent domestic priorities were neglected as the country fought an unnecessary war.

Now we have a ten-trillion dollar debt, rising unemployment, 47 million people without health insurance, our highest level of dependence on foreign oil in history, no major progress against global warming, and a highly tainted image abroad.

Obama's budget, like all budgets, is more than a statement of revenues and expenses. It is also a vision for our country and a reflection of the moral commitments that we believe governments have an obligation to meet. In other words, it describes the spending priorities for those obligations that are best enacted together through the institutions of government.

Obama's budget reflects a hard break from the past and a map of our recent failures. It invites us to consider the constructive and unique role that only government can play to ensure not only our security, but also equality of opportunity through education and health care, environmental protection, fairness in taxation and in the financial system, and other measures to promote the general welfare. None of these social goods can be achieved by any of us alone, nor by the unfettered free market, driven more by self-interest than by the common good. Any budget, therefore, must take seriously the moral obligations that we have to each other, and the responsibility of a people acting as a government to meet them without delay.

Many of the critics of this plan have suggested that this budget expands the role of government too much—calling it radical and socialist. While we may rightly worry about long-

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term budget deficits, the bigger question may be not whether government is too big, but whether those who *can* are willing to sacrifice enough to meet our collective moral obligations.

We are now seeing the devastating results of a lack of government oversight when it comes to the regulation of financial institutions and contractors. We see 18,000 people a year dying because of a lack of adequate health care. We see threats to public health from lack of environmental protection. We see dangers in the food supply because of inadequate inspection. We see failures to rebuild cities devastated by hurricanes.

The greatest irony of the Bush administration was that it thought it could succeed at its greatest goal by failing in virtually everything else it did. When those who oppose the unique responsibilities of government take control, they can promote their philosophy that government is bad simply by *being* bad. Incompetent government leads to further distrust in government.

But something happened on the way to the permanent Republican majority envisioned by former White House advisor Karl Rove. The disasters of the last eight years have given us no choice but to rediscover what good and smart government must be, because we cannot thrive without it. Like it or not. So for those who fear that Obama will give us a different country, I would ask them what part of our current mess they would like to keep.

So let's have our debate about how to meet our responsibilities, but let us not allow our representatives to neglect them or sully our discourse with silly slogans for political gain. In the end, any budget adopted by the duly elected representatives of the American people will give us what we deserve. And whatever form that takes, our country will still be called America. But after many years of an America governed by and for the wealthy and powerful, we finally look to becoming a different country indeed. And it's about time.

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