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How Obama Got It Right

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Morality drives policy. Too often, progressives have tried it the other way around, then looked on in dismay as conservatives led with their moral view and won one policy fight after another, even when polling showed most Americans disagreed with conservative policies!

On Thursday night, President Obama didn't make this mistake. Instead, he spoke to our better angels, confidently, forcefully and inclusively. He seized the moral authority with his grammar and demeanor: "Pass this jobs bill" is an imperative sentence; it attributes authority to the speaker. The repetition is a reminder of moral authority.

The speech was remarkable in many ways. It was plainspoken, Trumanesque. It focused on the progressive moral worldview that has from the beginning been the life force of American democracy. In virtually every sentence, it was a call for cooperative joint action for the benefit of all.

Let's look at the way Obama articulated the progressive moral worldview that recognizes both personal and social responsibility. He said:

Yes, we are rugged individualists. Yes, we are strong and self-reliant. And it has been the drive and initiative of our workers and entrepreneurs that has made this economy the engine and envy of the world.

But there has always been another thread running throughout our history -- a belief that there are some things we can only do together, as a nation...

Ask yourselves -- where would we be right now if the people who sat here before us decided not to build our highways, not to build our bridges, our dams, our airports? What would this country be like if we had chosen not to spend money on public high schools, or research universities, or community colleges? Millions of returning heroes, including my grandfather, had the opportunity to go to school because of the GI Bill. Where would we be if they hadn't had that chance?

No single individual built America on their own. We built it together. We have been, and always will be, one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all; a nation with responsibilities to ourselves and with responsibilities to one another. Members of Congress, it is time for us to meet our responsibilities.
Here's what we said in a Huffington Post piece back in July: Democracy, in the American tradition, has been defined by a simple morality: We Americans care about our fellow citizens, we act on that care and build trust, and we do our best not just for ourselves, our families, and our friends and neighbors, but for our country, for each other, for people we have never seen and never will see.

American Democracy has, over our history, called upon citizens to share an equal responsibility to work together to secure a safe and prosperous future for their families and nation. This is the central work of our democracy and it is a public enterprise. This, the American Dream, is the dream of a functioning democracy. That is the progressive moral view Obama used to such great effect Thursday night. However important particular policy prescriptions may be, they do not automatically evoke this moral view. No listener moves from Obama's talk of extending the social security tax holiday to the heartfelt understanding that we are responsible for one another.

Obama showed us he understood that policy flows from morality. That is why he articulated the morality behind his recommendations at the climactic moment of his speech. From this morality, he said, all else follows.

There are other things to note in the speech. One of those was his choice to say, "You should pass this jobs plan right away." The unusual imperative formulation is "right away." Typically, a politician would structure the imperative around the words "now" or "immediately." Such language, however, wouldn't fit the morality Obama hoped to embody Wednesday night.

"Do it now," is strict parent or authoritarian language. It is, "Do what I say." There's no less urgency in "right away," but there is a sense of "join us on this righteous path." The reason is that "away" is a spatial word that traces a path from where we are in a forward direction, a path of action toward the achievement of an accepted goal. It is inclusive and welcoming, while also indicating the urgency of the request. By using "right away," Obama skillfully communicated that we all in this together.

The president also explicitly rejected the conservative moral view of personal responsibility without social responsibility: the idea that no one should have to pay for anyone else, that paying for a government that helps fellow citizens who require help is immoral.

But what we can't do -- what I won’t do -- is let this economic crisis be used as an excuse to wipe out the basic protections that Americans have counted on for decades. I reject the idea that we need to ask people to choose between their jobs and their safety. I reject the argument that says for the economy to grow, we have to roll back
protections that ban hidden fees by credit card companies, or rules that keep our kids from being exposed to mercury, or laws that prevent the health insurance industry from shortchanging patients. I reject the idea that we have to strip away collective bargaining rights to compete in a global economy. We shouldn't be in a race to the bottom, where we try to offer the cheapest labor and the worst pollution standards. America should be in a race to the top. And I believe we can win that race.

In fact, this larger notion that the only thing we can do to restore prosperity is just dismantle government, refund everyone's money, let everyone write their own rules, and tell everyone they're on their own -- that's not who we are. That's not the story of America.

If you look at policies alone, policies that have been proposed by both Democrats and Republicans, you miss the main event. The very idea of working together for the good of fellow citizens in need of help is a progressive idea; it is the idea behind the view of democracy that has sustained America from its beginning.

Conservatives are not going to like cooperating on Obama's jobs plan. The very idea contradicts much of what they believe.

Meanwhile, the president put them in a bind. If they co-operate in helping their fellow citizens, they violate their code of personal responsibility without social responsibility. If they don't co-operate, they look callous and irresponsible.