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The Public: Obama's and Romney's Opposed Visions for a Free America

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America is divided about its future. Should it keep and expand the system that brought past opportunity, prosperity and freedom? Or should it dismantle that system?

President Obama recently reminded us that private life, private enterprise, and personal freedom depend on what the public provides.

"The Internet didn't get invented on its own. Government research created the Internet so that all the companies could make money off the Internet. (...) when we succeed, we succeed because of our individual initiative, but also because we do things together. There are some things, just like fighting fires, we don't do on our own. (...) So we say to ourselves, ever since the founding of this country (...) there are some things we do better together. That's how we funded the GI Bill. That's how we created the middle class. That's how we built the Golden Gate Bridge or the Hoover Dam. That's how we invented the Internet. That's how we sent a man to the moon. We rise or fall together as one nation and as one people (...) I still believe in that idea. You're not on your own, we're in this together. (...) If you were successful, (...) somebody helped to create this unbelievable American system that we have that allowed you to thrive."

Obama is acknowledging an important truth about American private life and enterprise: It builds on the public. From the beginning, the American public jointly created the means for knowledge, health, commerce, and recreation: Schools and libraries, hospitals, public roads, bridges, clean water and sewers; a federal banking system, a system of interstate commerce, public buildings and records, a court system mostly for commercial disputes, an army and a navy, police and firemen, public playgrounds and parks. The American public has always provided such things to promote private business and individual freedom.

More recently, the public has added funding for food safety and public health, university research, telecommunications, urban development, and subsidies for corporate profit in corporate-run industries like energy, agribusiness, and military contracting. There are thousands of ways, large and small, in which the public, all of
us acting together, provides the essentials for individual freedom and opportunity and thriving businesses.

That is what President Obama meant when he recently said, "If you've got a business - you did not build that," where "that" refers to the totality of what the public provides that empowered you, making available the conditions required for personal success.

The President states a simple truth here. Business owners across America do not build their own roads and bridges, sewers and water systems; they do not single-handedly maintain the health of their employees; they do not finance their own court system; and they did not build their own Internet to market and sell their products. The public provides these things, together. The government manages our shared financial resources to make these things happen. That's the government's job.

Obama could have communicated this fact better. When he says, "If you were successful, somebody along the line gave you some help. There was a great teacher somewhere in your life," he does not stress the fact that the public is a commonly organized and maintained system that is built and maintained by all of us together, in a shared effort to protect and empower Americans to live freely, and to thrive in their private and professional lives.

Conservatives are up in arms about Obama's statement, and for good reason. In the conservative worldview, the public's role for personal success is largely hidden or ignored. Instead, conservatives have a different vision of what America should be: everyone ought to look out for him- or herself - for example, buy your own protection for your life via privatized health care, and buy your own empowerment to succeed via privatized education.

But the health and education of Americans is not an individual concern at all. First, the individual cannot acquire it without communal efforts. Second, we depend on the health and education of our fellow citizens, as well as our own health and education.

Individual health is a prime example of public protection. It is maintained not only via health care (for those who can afford to buy their health), it further depends on a range of preventative needs that are secured via public provisions - disease control, environmental protection, food control, the sewer system, and clean drinking water, to name some. Every American depends on these provisions. Being healthy starts with being protected from disease, poisonous products, and pollution. The public - our commonly financed protection system - keeps you safe and healthy via these means of preventing disease. Furthermore, it is de facto not the case that only your own health concerns you. If you are a business owner, you want your employees to fall sick as little as possible. And if they do get ill, it is in your interest that they get
effective treatment - because they are profit creators in your business, you need them to be healthy, and if you care about them, you want them to be healthy.

Education, on the other hand, is a prime example of public empowerment. If you want to start a business or expand a business you already run, you will need to have access to educated employees. You do not pay for their education by yourself. You contributed to it via paying your fair share in taxes, together with your fellow citizens. You depend on educated doctors, lawyers, and engineers. Finally, the public provision of information - from access to the Internet to libraries and records to educational training - empowers you as an individual to thrive and succeed.

The notion of fair taxation is based on three ideals: First, taxes are a way to reimburse the community for what it has provided beforehand. This is about reciprocity. Second, taxes are a way to maintain freedom in America, by financing the system that allows the individual to flourish. Third, taxes have a moral function. Democracy is based on caring about one's fellow citizens, which requires maintaining high standards for humane treatment of our fellow Americans. This is about moral excellence. Some of our fellow citizens face more hardship than others, and it is simply right for all of us who constitute the public to guarantee humane treatment for all.

Extreme conservatives have a different morality. For them, democracy provides the liberty to pursue one's own self-interest and well-being without much responsibility for the interests or well-being of others. For them, individual responsibility is paramount.

As a result, they neglect the crucial role of the public for our freedom, private enterprise, and decent private lives.

Mitt Romney and other conservatives did not understand what the President was saying about the public. Or, if they did, they made it their mission to misportray Obama's ideals. First of all, they singled out the President's statement, "If you've got a business - you did not build that," claiming that the "that" in the statement refers to the business, not the public provisions. This is simply dirty politics.

But aside from this, it is interesting to see the conservative response. Here is Mitt Romney: "Do we believe in an America that is great because of government, or do we believe in an America that's great because of free people allowed to pursue their dreams and build their future."

Romney makes a distinction between government and the people. This is a common conservative argument, and it has to do with the fact that conservatives want as little protection and empowerment through commonly financed and organized provisions
as possible. What Romney's statement neglects is the fact that maintaining public provisions is not a matter of the government versus the people. The public came about because "free people" decided to come together and organize a public system that allows them to "pursue their dreams and build their future."

Romney's idea of freedom is based on the notion that American citizens must sink or swim on their own and that they are free if they have as little social responsibility as possible. If all citizens are equally uncommitted to each other's well-being, protection, and empowerment, freedom is maximized.

From a progressive point of view, Romney has it backwards. The call for "small government" really translates into neglectful government. The continuous downscaling of tax contributions from those that gain the most capital in our economy disables the government to the point where it can no longer carry out its moral mission -- the protection and empowerment of everyone equally.

What the conservatives are missing, and what Obama and progressives and Democrats across the country should communicate clearly, is this: Maintaining a robust public provides the conditions for a decent life and for individual success. This is about giving citizens the freedom to succeed. And the contributions of individuals to the public are a way to show commitment to both their own continuous success and to the American nation as a whole.

This is a central issue, not a minor one. It underlies the political division in our country. Obama and the Democrats want to continue the public provisions upon which freedom and material success has been built in our nation. Romney and conservative Republicans want to dismantle the public, and would thereby end the freedoms, the opportunities, and the conditions for success that the public provides.

That is why the conservatives have distorted the President's remarks on the subject and have attacked him so viciously on the basis of that distortion. They do not acknowledge the importance of the public for private life and private enterprise. They do not acknowledge the fact that public provisions are a result of Americans organizing together to maximize personal and national success and maintain moral excellence.

The future of our nation is at stake. We must openly and regularly talk about the function of the public. And we must repeat the fact that the public constitutes the people working together to better their lives. The public is, and has always been, requisite for our freedom, our success, and our humanity as a nation. Every candidate for office and every patriotic American should be saying this out loud, over and over. The role of the public is the central issue in this election. It is the issue that will determine our future.
We dare not be intimidated by conservative misrepresentations. Our message is clear. It is obvious if you think about it. But it has to be repeated clearly and effectively. The president and all who believe in the promise of America need to go on the offensive on this issue. We cannot afford to be defensive about what is required for our freedom, our prosperity, and our sense of humanity.