Romney, Ryan and the Devil's Budget: Will America Keep Its Soul?

by George Lakoff & Glenn W. Smith

America was born with a great soul, a moral view of Democracy in which citizens care about their fellow citizens and join together to take responsibility not just for themselves but for each other, for America as a union, a joint enterprise. The government's job was to carry out that moral vision and to do so it created what we call The Public, the provision of basic protection and empowerment for all.

From the beginning of America, the Public provided roads and bridges, public schools, hospitals, a national bank, a patent office, police, a justice system, public buildings and records, and more. Since then the Public has expanded as public needs have expanded -- sewers, clean water, public transportation, public health and disease control, scientific research, the internet, GPS, an energy grid, parks, and much, much more.

The Public provides freedom, the freedom to use what the Public provides to live a decent life and to start businesses. Without the public, there would be no American way of life, no freedom to live a decent life, to run or work in businesses, or work as a public servant. The Public carries out the work of America's soul.

Budgets are moral documents. National, state, and local budgets are commitments about where and how to carry out the work of America's soul, or to abandon it. A national budget that abandons the Public and the freedoms it gives us is selling America's very soul. Such a budget is the Devil's Budget. It uses numbers for an evil purpose: to rob us of our basic everyday freedom.

Who would propose a Devil's budget, and why?
First, why? A significant number of Americans do not share America's founding moral vision. They have a different one. Democracy in America provides the liberty to seek one's own interests and well-being, without being responsible for the interests or well-being of anyone else. It's a morality of personal, but not social, responsibility. The only freedom you should have is what you can provide for yourself, not what the Public provides for you to start out. America's soul, the provisions that represent citizens' moral commitment to each other, would be no more. Those who have this different moral sense will want a Devil's Budget. Let's call them extreme conservatives, who see the conservative moral vision as their highest priority.


The Devil is seductive. He is handsome, strong, charming, sincere, engages you in gentlemanly and respectful debate. He says he is on your side, that you are in a crisis. He offers to solve your crisis and makes it sound good. You too can be in the top 1 percent, part of the group with 40 percent of the wealth. He offers you freedom, freedom from dependency on The Public, freedom to care only for yourself, liberty from your fellow citizens caring for you, providing a starting point, freedom from you paying for anyone else.

The Romney-Ryan Budget is a Devil's budget. It guts The Public, America's soul -- The American Way of Life that we provide for each other.

A standard American budget has a way to deal with economic problems. First, extremely wealthy Americans whose wealth has depended on The Public's provisions should pay a fair share to restore and maintain the Public. Second, the Public should invest in the American economy by putting people to work rebuilding our infrastructure, educating our young, doing research for innovation, providing better forms of energy -- in short, restoring as many as possible of the freedoms that people need to live and make a living.

The money is there. America is richer than she has ever been. But much of America's wealth has been transferred from those whose labor secured it to wealthy investors and corporate managers. A sufficient portion of that wealth needs to be used by The Public for investments in our future, not drained from The Public when it is needed most. A standard budget would restore and maintain America's soul. But that is not what the Devil's Budget would do.

What Evil -- with a capital "E" -- would a Devil's Budget do? So far Democrats have been pointing to its cruelty: its horrific effects on individuals -- death, illness, suffering, greater poverty, and loss of opportunity, productive lives,
and money. All true and more. But there is a larger and worse overall Evil, one that deserves the capital "E."

America’s soul resides in our relation to one another, the way citizens have from the beginning joined together to form a government whose mission is to protect and empower everyone equally, and to use that government for the sake of The Public, the system that provides the basic means for our freedom to live decent lives and pursue happiness of all kinds, whether it comes from wealth or making music, or becoming a doctor, a scientist, a businessman, an athlete, a teacher, or whatever you find fulfilling. The Public is what unites us in a common enterprise, and the destruction of The Public is a destruction of the bonds that hold us together.

The destruction of those bonds creates Evil with a big E because it institutionalizes the you're-on-your-own view of democracy, democracy as providing the "liberty" to pursue your own interests with no responsibility for the interests or well-being of others. It enshrines greed, selfishness, and dog-eat-dog competition as the governing principle of American life. The intentional severing of our human bonds is the big Evil.

Whatever callously divides communities into sets of disconnected individuals and tries to hide or erase our interdependent humanity, that is what human cultural, religious, literary and folktale traditions have long labelled Evil. We think the Devil's Budget has earned its name.

Those who advocate for such a budget may not be individually evil. That is an independent issue. Demonizing others is its own kind of evil, and we do not apply the name to Romney, Ryan or others. Perhaps many who advocate a Devil's Budget know not what they do.

The big Evil is even bigger than you might think, because it is hard or virtually impossible to reverse once it has gone on for a while.

Let’s take "a while" to be until 2050. Derek Thompson, in TheAtlantic.com on March 21, 2012, surveyed The Congressional Budget Office's projection of the Ryan budget estimates to 2050. Defense spending would be kept relatively constant, while what the government has left would be "0.75 percent of GDP - about 100 billion for everything besides defense that the government does." That’s what is devoted to education and vocational training now. Suppose that was kept. "It would leave nothing for infrastructure. Nothing for unemployment insurance. Nothing for food stamps. Nothing for border patrol. Nothing for the FDA, FAA, or FBI. Nothing for research and development. Nothing, even, to pay people to
work in government! Do you think it’s important to support our veterans with health care, education, and retirement security? Sorry. Veterans programs currently cost more than 1% of our GDP. There would be no room."

The Congressional Budget office estimates that Ryan's "long-term budget, if you project forward defense spending, would cut 91 percent from these and all other non-defense programs. Ninety-one percent." That's 91 percent of The Public gone: Medical and scientific research. Pell grants. The EPA. The NIH. NPR. The small business administration. Unemployment insurance. Regulation of corporations. Money to help state and local governments. Highway repair. Air traffic controllers. And all government employees doing everything The Public does.

This work is done by institutions that have been built up over a long time, with people who have learned to do their jobs over a long time. You don't just get the institutions back after you destroy them. They are gone. If they are replaced, they will be privatized -- run for corporate profit, not for public benefit. You will pay through the nose for what you need, if you can get it at all.

The destruction of The Public is not reversible. It would be the death of the very idea of America. Here's what it would mean.

Even more, a lot more, of the nation's wealth than the current 40 percent going to the top 1 percent. Poverty up. Opportunity gone. No way for the poor and middle class to get a college education, and maybe not even a decent K-12 education, and certainly not public pre-schools. As unemployment rises, competition for jobs gets greater, and so wages get even lower and pensions and health benefits disappear. As the public control of the airwaves disappears with the FCC, the corporate control of news rises, and objectivity of reporting gets much lower. Freedom of the press becomes meaningless. When the military controls almost all of the budget, it gets immensely strong in society, threatening civilian control of the military. When the EPA and FDA disappear, say goodbye to clean air, clean water, and safe food. Wilderness in the National Parks will not exist: it will be destroyed in the race to get at our natural resources -- wood, minerals, oil and gas.

Along the way, there will be all the cruelty that Democrats are now warning against -- the elderly, children, and the poor going without medical care, and so suffering and dying. The unemployed losing their homes. Our young people unable to get the education what would give the freedom to "pursue happiness" -- and thus being forced into lives the keep them from being fulfilled. And much more.
In the outrage over Rep. Todd Akin’s "legitimate rape" statement, the role of the Devil's Budget is getting drowned out. Rep. Akin, together with Rep. Paul Ryan, has supported kinds of budgetary legislation that would eliminate funding not only for abortion, but also for family planning, birth control, sex education, including in that legislation a provision that would define a fertilized egg as a legal person, and thus define abortion as murder. In some circumstances, even miscarriages might be viewed as crimes. It is an attempt to use budgets to exert male control over women's bodily freedom, in some cases over her very life, and over a family's freedom to decide on how many, if any, children to have. The budget is not just an economic document. It does not just reflect an economic theory about deficits or jobs or building the economy. It is a moral document and it can be so Evil as to kill the heart of America.

America would no longer be America. Humpty Dumpty cannot be put back together again, because all the pieces will either be destroyed or owned by corporations with most of the wealth generated going to wealthy investors and corporate managers.

That is Evil with a capital E. That is what the Devil's Budget is about.

The biggest lie is that there is, or should be, no Public. The biggest lie is that Democracy is about personal freedom alone, about the "liberty" to seek your own interests with no responsibility for the interests or well-being of your fellow citizens. The biggest lie is a moral lie. If believed and carried to the conclusion defined by a Devil's Budget, it means Evil with a capital E and the loss of the American soul.

The idea of American Individualism is a moral lie. There can be no Individualism without The Public. Individualism can only begin where The Public leaves off. Individualism begins after the roads are built, after individualists have had an education, after medical research has cured their diseases, after the individualists have received from The Public land grants, grazing, water, and mineral leases, oil and agriculture subsidies, after they have received crucial patents.

Are individualists willful liars? We doubt it. To lie, you have to know that you are lying and intending to deceive. We take most individualists at their word, that they really do believe that they did everything without help from The Public. They believe it so strongly that they can't even see the hand of The Public in their success. And there is a reason for this blindness that follows from the way brains work.
You think with your brain; all thoughts are physical, a matter of the activation of brain circuits called "frames." Everything you understand uses frame-circuits that structure how you think. Without the right frame-circuits, there are facts you just will not be able to make sense of. The frames come in hierarchies, with moral frames at the top. With an extreme conservative morality, you will have an Individualism frame governing your political and economic frames. The fact that real individual achievements depend on what The Public provides to give them their start and help them along will not be comprehensible to extreme conservatives. Why? Because they do not have the American moral frame that requires both personal and social responsibility; the conservative moral frame has only personal responsibility, and the closest thing to social responsibility is imposing personal responsibility alone maximally in every area of life. This requires eliminating as much as possible of The Public. The mechanism for this is the Devil's Budget.

Paul Ryan is a personable individualist and extreme conservative. And he is smart -- seen as an intellectual by his conservative colleagues because has mastered budget policy enough to construct a Devil's Budget with all the right numbers. Not the right numbers to eliminate the deficit, as Paul Krugman has observed. But the right numbers to eliminate The Public, which is the real conservative goal.

Mitt Romney knows about Devil's Budgets from Bain Capital, whose goal was to make as much money as possible for investors and major management by squeezing human values out of businesses: treating employees as resources for profit, maximizing profits by outsourcing, minimizing skill levels, eliminating unions, ending pensions, seeking tax loopholes, moving profits to tax havens, eliminating factories and firing employees, moving jobs abroad, devastating communities -- whatever was necessary to maximize profits for Romney and other managers and investors. Liberty for Romney has meant applying Devil's Budgets in corporate life. The Romney-Ryan ticket is ideal for destroying the American ideal of The Public and the freedom that it provides for all of us.

In what was perhaps the first statement of the morality that lit the Soul of America, John Winthrop told his fellow passengers on the New World-bound Arbella in 1630:

...that every man might have need of others, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection. From hence it appears plainly that no man is made more honorable than another or more wealthy etc., out of any particular and singular respect to himself...

This is the morality that informs the Declaration and the Constitution. It is the morality that led to emancipation, to universal suffrage, to the New Deal...
and the Great Society, and Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms -- freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, freedom from fear -- with the recognition that we are all in this democratic experiment together. It is what, from the beginning, has informed the formation of The Public. It is that sense of morality that we must maintain.