

The Budget Debate, Revealed? Not Yet.



By [Jim Sleeper](#) - April 17, 2011, 4:15PM

One of the better sketches of at what's at stake in the budget debate comes from *The New York Times'* [Richard W. Stevenson](#), who suggests that it's opening the philosophical and political chasm between two camps. Well, sort-of.

On one side are conservatives such as Arthur Brooks of the American Enterprise Institute - who would stay "on the path envisioned by the founders" toward a republic with limited government. Its safety net, as Rep. Paul Ryan's budget proposal puts it, "should never become a hammock, lulling able-bodied citizens into lives of complacency and dependency," as Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid supposedly do.

On the other side, President Obama told us last week that Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid are indispensable to a republican ethos of "rugged individualists with a healthy skepticism of too much government."

Both sides claim to reach for the same goal, in other words, but by antithetical means. But neither side is telling the truth about the liberal capitalist economy that's the stage for this great debate.

The American Enterprise Institute, the Heritage Foundation, the Liberty Fund, the Manhattan Institute, the Cato Institute, and all the prim little centers they're funding on American campuses won't tell you that capitalism is no longer John Locke's or even Andrew Carnegie's capitalism. It is a casino-finance, corporate-welfare, consumer-marketing juggernaut - dare I call it a regime? - that is draining every wellspring of republican virtue into the habits of a corporate state.

Nor will they tell you that this regime relies for and wants to own wholly the big-government whose rules, regulations, and subsidies already abet the regime's mindless drive to become something few of the founders and no honorable conservative today would defend.

Conservatives aren't blind to the consequent, accelerating degradation of the American public into a Roman mob, with gladiators and other phony escapes, family dissolution, and the rest. They've simply decided to blame it all on "the Sixties" and on liberals.

They think that only the right people can rule and that the populace can be goaded into falling into those leaders arms. They just haven't noticed that the arms they'll fall into ultimately are non-American global capitalist arms, not those of the Koch brother or financier-cum-grand strategist Roger Hertog.

And the John Roberts Court, especially "Antonin the Innocent" Scalia, who would borrow nothing from foreign jurisprudence, haven't noticed that in rulings like *Citizens United*, which privileges "speech" over human speakers, they're entrusting our destiny to corporations as foreign as the East India Company.

Obama and most of the liberal institutes and their apologists in the orchestra of high-minded liberal opinion are no more candid about what's going on. You haven't heard them say that as capitalism has metastasized in the ways I've just mentioned, the big government that's so necessary to ameliorate its worst effects is the very same government that enables those bad effects because it's really the bought-and-paid-for servant of the forces of casino finance, corporate welfare, and consumer marketing.

Obama's Democrats are the ameliorators and rationalizers, but they're no more telling the whole truth than are the would-be 18th-century gentlemen who have undertaken what *Washington Monthly* editor Paul Glastris has called "a *creeping coup d'etat*" to rule us in a world that has passed them by.

The Times' Stevenson, who is ultimately part of the problem, writes that the liberals are on the defensive because recent stimulus packages didn't prompt a recovery that's vigorous enough to vindicate their Keynesian premises about government's stimulative, redistributionist role. He doesn't mention that bigger stimuli might have vindicated Keynesian arguments, because the very prospect of them was off the table, owing to the great but unmentionable shift in power from nations like the American republic to multi-national corporations that are answerable to no polity or moral code, here or abroad.

How do the 18th-century gentlemen at American Enterprise, Heritage, and the rest feel about that? They won't tell us. How does Obama feel about it? He won't tell us, either.

Who'll put it back in the debate? Only individualists who are rugged enough not just to defy the consensus in increasingly bizarre and brutal ways or to rationalize as Malcolm Gladwell, David Brooks, Adam Gopnik, and other chasm-dancers do, **but to find new ways to challenge it**. Neither conservatives nor liberals as we know them now are doing it because they aren't being candid about how the corporatist capitalist ground they're standing on has been shifting under them.