

My Turn: Uncle Sam is a thief! Lock him up!

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Rep. Josh Yokela recently defended the popular libertarian meme that “taxation is theft” (Monitor Opinion, April 1). The meme links the twin institutions that the far right believes constitute the ideal society – an unregulated (free) market economy and a strictly limited government.

Its reason for small government is that government has the power to tax and regulate. It can take or limit private property, the cornerstone of free markets and of personal and corporate liberty.

The meme sees democracy as a particularly dangerous form of government. It allows jealous, greedy or compassionate majorities to tax and regulate the “minority,” in this case the minority of highly successful rich people and corporations.

The meme is in service to the radical right movement that holds this ideology. Launched in the early 1970s by some very rich people and bankrolled and controlled today by a small core of wealthy donors, the movement seeks the twin objectives of a free (unregulated) economy and a strictly limited government. Most of its hundreds of organizations and projects claim these twin objectives as their mission. This is the case, for example, with the movement’s 64 state think tanks, its hundred or more national tanks and university institutes, the 36 state chapters of its Koch-controlled Americans For Prosperity, its well-heeled super PACs, and its donor networks, including Donor’s Trust and the Koch Donor Network.

So the meme is not only a catchy phrase. It serves a significant ideology and an extremely affluent, strategic and embedded social movement that, among major victories like Citizens United and climate change denial, has taken over the Republican Party.

The view from the right

The far right sees the world quite differently than many of us moderates and progressives to its left. For example, it focuses on individuals and sees them as essentially self-interested (greedy) by nature. It sees compassion as mostly a detriment (Nobel Prize-winning libertarian economist James Buchanan saw it as an Achilles heel that would eventually destroy the human race). It sees government, particularly democracy, as a grave danger. It sees the Earth as a resource for human exploitation.

Many others of us see the world as having more dimensions. Earth, for example, is both a resource to use and a rich commons to sustain. People are mixes of self-interest and caring, and nurture as well as nature plays a large role in shaping this mix. Compassion is the great hope, rather than the despair, of humankind. Government is both threat and opportunity. Democracy is not the Devil incarnate but our great gift to the world and our chief mechanism for sustaining community.

Visions of taxation

Each of the various non-theft visions of taxation below emerges from this communal sense, this “we” view of America. The view embraces both “secure the blessings of liberty” and “promote the general welfare.” I find validity in all of the visions but have space to elaborate only briefly on them.

Rather than taxation as theft, taxes and the general social welfare they support are:

- The dues of citizenship.
- The key remedy for the market’s mal-distribution of income.
- The safety net of capitalism; capitalism’s savior, its Good Samaritan.
- The device that fulfills the American Promise.
- The prime leveler of a very slanted playing field.
- The corrective for investors rather than workers getting the bulk of corporate profits.
- The recognition of commonwealth – that it takes a community to generate our GDP.

The consensus – taxes and social welfare

America faced an identity crisis in the explosion of big corporate capitalism immediately after the Civil War. Suddenly big corporations like Standard Oil, U.S. Steel, and Swift & Armour produced enormous wealth that made their owners unbelievably rich.

But the wealth explosion created major social problems, such as massive labor exploitation of women, children, immigrants and others; constant booms and busts with widespread unemployment and suffering; overcrowded, disease-ridden, crime-infested slums; severe problems of worker safety and workplace injury; pervasive problems of harmful, misbranded and adulterated food; poverty as workers outlived their usefulness to employers; and contamination of air and water.

The most egregious issue was the enormous income and wealth disparity between the captains of industry (Rockefellers, Mellons, Vanderbilts, etc.) and most everyone else.

America had to decide whether it would ignore or address this inhumanity. Initially many of America’s elite chose to embrace the captains and ignore the problems. Major economists simply lauded the invisible hand that promised prosperity to all who worked hard. Prominent clergy preached the so-called Gospel of Wealth, the notion that wealth is God’s reward to the righteous.

Eminent academics promoted Social Darwinism, the notion that life is a struggle to survive and thrive, and that rich people are simply the fittest in that struggle and poor people the least fit. That distinction is heard clearly today in right-wing classifications of “makers and takers” or “producers and parasites.”

But others such as Jane Addams, W.E.B. DuBois, Samuel Gompers and John Dewey believed that America had a responsibility to protect people against the harms of big corporate capitalism (Wall Street capitalism in contrast to our traditional and usually revered Main Street capitalism). Calling themselves “progressives,” they saw big government as the only force strong enough to

address the harm. Over time, economic regulation, social welfare, and anti-discrimination laws and programs were adopted and made big dents in the long list of big corporate problems.

After WWII, a loose consensus took shape and lasted for several decades. It saw America not as a gold mine for some but as a land of Promise for most. The Promise was that if you work hard and contribute to society (or truly can't), you deserve a decent share of security (against unemployment, for example) and of basics such as education, housing, food, health care and retirement income.

Although the left and right argued over the proper amount of taxation, social welfare and regulation, almost no major Republican or Democratic leader eventually questioned the need for Social Security, national parks, air pollution laws, unemployment insurance, child labor laws, anti-discrimination laws, disability insurance, food safety regulations, building codes, Medicare, food stamps, homeowner tax breaks, public education, progressive income taxes and many other things.

In essence, the consensus recognized that big corporate capitalism is a powerful producer of wealth but a horrible distributor of that wealth. It recognized that a mixed economy of big markets and big government is needed if the American Promise is to be fulfilled. Rather than theft, they saw taxation and social welfare (along with regulation) as vital mechanisms to achieve the Promise. They saw a mixed economy – big markets and big government – as vital to save capitalism and as the formula adopted by all of the market democracies around the world to humanize big corporate capitalism.

The consensus offered people on both sides of the aisle visions of taxation as something other than theft.

Two quick suggestions. First, be sure to get familiar with the radical right movement, its history, affluence, goals, strategies, organizations and achievements. Second, especially if you are a moderate, read Jerry Taylor's *Alternative to Ideology*. He is one of a group of lifelong libertarians who recently left the libertarian Cato Institute to form the Niskanen Institute. They all abandoned narrow ideology in favor of something more pragmatic; they all value both free markets and big government social welfare; and, most interestingly, they credit climate change as the impetus for their altered hearts and minds.