

## Post-Election Agenda: Destigmatize American Government

By Stephan Richter - October 04, 2012

---

Many Americans — who rightly take pride in their country's history as the first modern democracy — have lost faith in the government to do the people's work. Instead, they profess faith in the private sector and corporations to make the right decisions. As long as this "government = bad" equation holds, writes Stephan Richter, the country will continue to fall short of its potential.

One of the biggest competitiveness challenges the United States faces in the global arena is entirely self-imposed — and easily remediable. It is the widespread belief that the idea of government itself, as opposed to a free-wheeling and unimpeded private sector, is somehow a very bad idea.

How is it possible to consider a decision as positive if made by the private sector — and as negative if made by the government?

The government, lest we forget, is the formal, legitimized expression of the sum total of a nation's will. Under the concept of representative government, it directly reflects the citizens' abilities, actions and aspirations.

Conversely, if the assumption is widespread that government systematically dispenses bad decisions, this ultimately represents a shrill vote of non-confidence not so much in the idea of government itself, but in the people who collectively elect that government.

To any outside observer at least, the United States — given its rich endowment, dynamic population base and long democratic history — should excel on the issue of self-government.

This is especially true when compared to the practice and idea of government in Europe throughout history. Although now, for the first time, in a thoroughly democratic phase, there is indeed a lot of "bad" that has emanated from Europe's governments in the past. The scourges of fascism and communism are only the most striking forms of abuse of public power over private citizens.

And yet, it is not in Europe but in today's America where the idea of government is almost instinctively held out as suspect. A recent story by Washington Post blogger Sarah Kliff provides a perfect illustration of the prevailing level of absurdity.

Ms. Kliff went to a McDonald's fast food store in a Washington, D.C., suburb to interview customers about the company's new policy of displaying the number of calories for each of the items on its menu.

Some people, including the reporter, found that the information was printed so small that it was difficult to read, much less notice. Other people gave the company plaudits for making the change, which is designed to empower consumers with knowledge about their caloric intake.

One interviewee who initially reacted very positively, however, was taken aback when Ms. Kliff informed him that McDonald was simply getting a head-start on implementing a stipulation in President Obama's health care reform law, which requires fast-food chains with at least 20 locations to provide that information to their customers.

It used to be said in the United States, that knowledge creates freedom — that is, the freedom to make a well-informed decision.

After applauding the company's move when he thought it was completely voluntary, the customer's viewpoint changed quite radically. It now became a foreboding sign of the government restricting individual freedoms and consumer choice.

Mind you: The same outcome, just triggered by a different source, resulting in a vehemently different evaluation of its intent, value and worthiness.

As a general rule, one should never place too much stock in small bits of conversation like this. But this moment so perfectly captures the sense of confusion — and, yes, paranoia — in the American psyche that I will violate that rule.

How is it humanly possible to consider a decision as positive if made by the private sector — and as highly negative if made ("imposed") by the government?

The whole idea of democratic government, that the people rule, is that they are free to choose collectively to give rules to their society. It used to be said in the United States, in the late-18th century, that knowledge creates freedom — that is, the freedom to make a well-informed decision.

No longer. Now, the general rule is "companies good, government bad." That is all the more incomprehensible as — despite the efforts of contemporary Republicans to vilify government — the government of the United States has a rather robust and positive performance record.

That is especially true when compared to governments' performance on other continents throughout modern history. Usually, Americans take great pride in publicly acknowledging if they are performing better as a nation on something than others.

Not in this case, however. The constant diminution of the public's will, along with the systematic nurturing of suspicions and conspiratorial hints of illegitimacy, is perhaps the biggest force that is holding today's America back.

The general rule of "companies good, government bad" is all the more incomprehensible given the government's positive record of performance.

If a critical segment of the population — not just Republicans, but also significant parts of the Independents, now the country's largest voting bloc — do not believe in the legitimacy or even well-advisedness of the government taking action, then the United States does have a problem.

Often, reference is made to "reviving the animal spirits" in the markets to strengthen the U.S. economy, buttress growth and reduce unemployment. But it is probably far more important to revive the nation's collective spirit to believe in its citizens' ability to govern themselves in a well-reasoned, communal fashion.

Imagine the waste

The alternate suggestion, that only the private sector is a font of wisdom and legitimacy, belies not just human history, but very much the American record.

Given the continental size of the economy and the vastness of the domestic market, U.S. corporations have always tended to migrate toward becoming behemoths. In the process, their internal logic (all under the mantra to reach "full scale") is to overreach. Their preference is not so much for an empowered citizen as a docile and predictable consumer.

That is nothing other than a national tragedy and fundamental betrayal of the ideals of the American Revolution. In a truly admirable fashion at the time, it was all about citizens' empowerment.

It is therefore high time that Americans reconsider the toxic mix that has been presented to them. This is especially important with regard to reconsidering true front organizations such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. It has morphed from a representative body of business to an outright ideological fighting tool.

When it came to detecting expressions of Soviet/Communist ideology, Americans — politicians and private citizens alike — were always quick to discern any emanations of it, all the way into the far-flung reaches of Southeast Asia.

The preference of U.S. corporations is not so much for an empowered citizen as for a docile and predictable consumer.

The same alertness, much more vital to the nation's survival, is required now, directed against organizations that were long considered as American as apple pie.

Unless there is a profound change soon, a significant part of the country is reapplying the madmen belief of McCarthyism and the red menace at home to the very idea of representative and democratic government.

Just imagine the waste: The U.S. government annually spends \$3.7 trillion at the federal level alone. That is an amount larger than the GDP of all but three nations on earth.

In short, we are talking about real money here. As long as the effort is maintained to declare much of that expenditure a waste, it is tantamount to claiming national impotence.

Viewed in that light, it is not the Democrats or the unions who are wasting public resources, although they do their fair share of it.

Rather, it is the Republicans and their acolytes who, in their zealous overreach, declare basically all government spending (except for defense) as illegitimate. That defense spending is one of the most wasteful forms of spending public dollars goes unmentioned, of course.

In conclusion, the real menace that any American interested in resuscitating the nation's competitiveness today ought to address urgently is the demonization of government.

No matter how insistent press releases from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and events at increasingly black-baiting, neo-revanchist think tanks like the Cato Institute may be, the fact of the matter is that Americans have plenty of reason to be proud of their notion of government as practiced.

No doubt, government is in constant need of continuous improvement, as all human forms of organization are. But as long as the malicious equation of "government = bad" is peddled throughout the land, Americans will never be able to live their nation's immense, God-given potential.