

Whose prosperity is it anyway?

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By Howard Rich

Who gets credit for Sergei Rachmaninoff's famous Piano Concerto No. 2? The composer? Or should we really thank the manufacturer of the piano he used while performing it? What about the Declaration of Independence? Does the credit go to Thomas Jefferson? Or does our debt of gratitude go to whoever produced the paper and ink products used in its drafting?

What about when Americans mow their yards on the weekends? Is it their hard work and sweat that gets the job done? Or should the credit instead go to Edwin Budding, who invented the first lawnmower in the early nineteenth century?

Questions like these have become increasingly relevant in light of Barack Obama's infamous "you didn't build that" remark — which suggested that Americans who own their own businesses somehow aren't responsible for the success of those businesses.

"If you've got a business — you didn't build that," Obama said. "Somebody else made that happen."

In the narrowest of senses Obama is correct — just as Mitt Romney was correct a decade ago when he asserted that participants at the Salt Lake City Olympics "didn't get here solely on (their) own power."

Obviously nothing is ever built or achieved in a vacuum — because none of us exist in a vacuum. We all have mothers and fathers, and in addition to the genes they passed along to us we all take something from the people, resources and experiences we are exposed to over the course of our lives. Similarly, we all subsist in some measure thanks to the work of others — who in turn subsist in some measure on what we produce (although the number of "takers" in our society grows with each new government expansion).

Even more fundamentally — as the ink on the Declaration of Independence reminds us — we have all been endowed by our creator with certain inalienable rights, although once again these fundamental liberties will continue to contract as the state expands.

In acknowledging this basic human interdependence, however, we must not bow to the collectivist dogma that Obama and his fellow command economists are pushing as part of their effort to "spread the wealth around." With a deficit approaching \$16 trillion, we simply can't afford to do that. More importantly we cannot let them continue to confuse the free market's promise of equal opportunity with government desire for equal outcomes.

Interdependence does not mean that people are entitled to equal, or even similar outcomes — it is simply a means of letting the free market fill needs and satisfy wants with maximum efficiency, thereby maximizing prosperity. Indeed government efforts to impose equal outcomes will only suppress the market forces responsible for raising everyone's level of prosperity. They will also dramatically expand the scope — and cost — of taxpayer-subsidized dependence, perpetuating a downward spiral.

That's why "you didn't build that" is so dangerous. It is more than just a metaphor for Obama's collectivist vision — it is a rebuke of American exceptionalism, another attempt by the New Keynesians to separate Americans from their innovative capacity and the wealth, jobs and investment that capacity creates.

Thanks to an incessant barrage of class warfare propaganda and escalating expectations of entitlement, America has become a nation that demonizes wealth — and by extension the process that produces it and the individuals who acquire it. As a result capitalism has become synonymous with an unruly, malevolent monster that government must subjugate in order to guarantee everyone's "fair share."

In a recent collection of essays called *The Morality of Capitalism*, Dr. Tom G. Palmer of the Cato Institute confronts this perception head-on.

"Markets make it possible for the most altruistic, as well as the most selfish, to advance their purposes in peace," Palmer writes. "Those who dedicate their lives to helping others use markets to advance their purposes, no less than those whose goal is to increase their stores of wealth."

In fact, "markets make possible the charity of the charitable," Palmer notes.

That's true. But more importantly, markets channel both altruism and self-interest into wealth-expanding, job-creating, innovation-spawning productivity, which in turn provides for the needs of society far better than any government-driven approach ever could.

Americans are interdependent — they are not (at least not yet) part of a collective. However the more we move toward such a society — and away from the free market system that built this nation — the less wealth, fewer jobs and we will see. That's why Obama's assault on wealth creation is even more dangerous than his attempts to redistribute it.

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