

Obama's slim majority parading as 'we the people'

By: Roger Pilon – January 22nd, 2013

Pierce the soaring rhetoric of President Obama's second inaugural address and its central message rings clear as a bell: despite the fact that nearly half the nation rejected his big-government vision, he'll impose it on us — because, as he's so often said, "We're all in this together."

Indeed, "together" — that appeal to unity — appears no fewer than seven times in his short speech, "we the people" five. Throw in "one nation," "one people," "common effort," and "common purpose," along with several other collective incantations and you have a man who has little conception of life and liberty outside of government. He tells us we don't need "to settle centuries-long debates about the role of government for all time," but he's not about to allow out-of-control deficits and debt to diminish its role for our time. "Deficit" appears once in the speech, "debt" not at all.

This is progressive tribalism on steroids, with the chief leading his people toward his enlightened moral vision. Much of that vision is inspiring, of course: Seneca Falls, Selma, Stonewall, welcoming immigrants. But on the massive entitlements side, to say that Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security "do not sap our initiative" is to be obtuse to the human condition. When he rejects "the belief that America must choose between caring for the generation that built this country and investing in the generation that will build its future," he rejects the very premise of economics — that the world is a world of scarcity. Across America those choices are being made, responsibly, even as the president and his party refuse to make them.

Most striking of all is that he constructs this fantasy on the nation's founding documents. He opens with the Constitution, which itself begins with "We the people." But from there the document sets forth not simply a limited set of powers — that's where you'll find "the role of government" — but a vast body of checks on what "we the people" can do "together," through government. That's the last we hear of the document, however, save for an allusion to it in this pregnant paragraph:

But we have always understood that when times change, so must we; that fidelity to our founding principles requires new responses to new challenges; that preserving our individual freedoms ultimately requires collective action. For the American people can no more meet the demands of today's world by acting alone than American soldiers could have met the forces of fascism or communism with muskets and militias. No single person can train all the math and science teachers we'll need to equip our children for the future, or build the roads and networks and research labs that will bring new jobs and businesses to our shores. Now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation, and one people.

The purport of that allusion — “muskets and militias” — is clear. That old, antiquated Constitution, which established a limited realm for “collective action,” mainly to secure individual freedom, is not up to the task of meeting today’s challenges. For that, “now, more than ever, we must do these things together, as one nation, and one people.”

That’s not what we learn from the Declaration of Independence, the main inspiration for Obama’s address. Give him credit: unlike in his first year, when he said that every nation thinks it’s exceptional, he’s finally recognized that American exceptionalism is rooted in “our allegiance to an idea, articulated in a declaration made more than two centuries ago.” But he completely misunderstands that idea. The Founders did not throw off a tyrannical king only to impose on themselves a tyrannical majoritarian democracy.

Yet that’s what we’ve got, with so much of life, from retirement to health care and on and on, regimented by government — and he wants still more. This is not the individual liberty of which the Declaration speaks. In Obama’s own words, it’s “*collective* action,” under the direction of Washington’s bureaucrats. And the political dynamics of this system, which economists have long understood and explained, are fast leading us to the welfare state, the kind of state we see collapsing in Europe.

Far from being a modern, then, Obama comes from an earlier age, from a time when progressive ideologues championed a bold new era of collective accomplishments. Ignoring economic reality, to say nothing of basic moral principle or the Constitution, they charged ahead, much as Obama is doing. But reality is catching up. It always does. The question for us now, therefore, and for the next four years, is whether enough economic realists, armed with a decent respect for *individual* liberty, will be able to slow the Obama juggernaut before we go over the cliffs that lie just ahead.