



The Choice Before Tomorrow

Paul Ryan | September 15, 2010

In yesterday's *New York Times*, David Brooks – a columnist of intellectual rigor and much-deserved respect – wrote a critique of the views advanced by the American Enterprise Institute's president Arthur Brooks and myself. As I told David earlier today, I'm appreciative of his column, which elevates the tone and the substance of the debate to a serious level.

Whether because of a misreading by David Brooks or a failure to make our case with clarity, his column titled "The Day After Tomorrow" seems to obscure the choice that must be settled before tomorrow – and in the process it inadvertently distorts the vital national debate we need to have about the size, scope, and role of the Federal government.

To set the stage: On Monday, Arthur Brooks and I made the case for why America needs to awake from our (collective) sleepwalk away from the founding principles of the American republic.

In broad strokes, what Arthur Brooks and I believe is that we have to decide between an opportunity society, where the government promotes a vibrant free enterprise system and sturdy safety net v. an expanding social welfare state – one where the government assumes greater control of more sectors of the economy and more aspects of our lives.

That doesn't mean we believe every action by the Federal government is wrong or unwise or even counterproductive. But we do argue – with considerable evidence on our side – that the Federal government has added layer upon layer to its core functions; that it is now on a path that everyone agrees is fiscally unsustainable; and that it is therefore in urgent need of fundamental reform.

We face, if you like, A Time for Choosing.

David Brooks agrees that government ought to be limited – but he is most eager to get on with the "day after tomorrow, after the centralizing forces are thwarted." I'm as eager as Brooks is for the day after tomorrow. But the critical debate about just how and why the expansion of government needs to be "thwarted" is more important and more interesting, I think, than Brooks acknowledges in his column.

The lines have been drawn. As espoused openly by the current Congressional Majority – and as manifested in their recent, sweeping legislative "achievements" – the core duty of government is no longer to protect natural rights; it is to invent, redistribute and ration new rights. Don't take my word for it. In a revealing response to questions regarding Constitutional constraints on government, my colleague who sets health care policy in the House Ways and Means Committee responded: "*The Federal government can do most anything in this country.*"

The challenge goes beyond "the current concentration of power in Washington," which Brooks rightly opposes. For the record, I first introduced A Roadmap for America's Future when President George W. Bush sat in the Oval Office. The explosion in government spending and overreach has been a bipartisan failure, not for years but for decades. Politicians continued to make promises that simply cannot be kept. But reaping comes after sowing – and we now face a debt so massive that it will cause, sooner than we think, the collapse of our social safety net. Contrary to David Brooks' assertion, "simply getting



government out of the way” is not our prescription to meet our pressing fiscal and economic challenges.

This is certainly not the case made by Arthur Brooks in his book *The Battle*. Nor is it the case I make in *A Roadmap for America's Future*. In fact, our aim is the same one David Brooks says is the aim of millions of voters who are alarmed by the Democrats' lavish spending: for government to play some positive role in their lives. That is actually what we are after – government playing a positive role, respecting its proper limits.

Let me be specific: I propose to modernize Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security so these critical programs can meet their mission in the 21st century; secure access to universal health coverage where patients and doctors – not government or insurance company bureaucrats – are the nucleus of the system; restructure Federal job training programs of the past century to better prepare our workforce for the challenges in today's global economy. There are dozens of additional policy reforms in the Roadmap consistent with the mutually reinforcing goals of individual opportunity and income security.

The Roadmap's reforms are – contrary to the frantic attacks made on it by some of its more partisan critics – fair, gradual, sensible, and aimed specifically to avoid the harsh austerity that will result from maintaining the status quo.

Those who claim the mantle of compassion and concern for the working class should consider this: The greatest threat to our social insurance programs today is the icy indifference shown by those unwilling to have an adult conversation on how to avert their looming collapse. Not only are the major health and retirement security programs approaching bankruptcy; the looming debt crisis will hit hardest those most reliant on the safety net the Federal

government helps provide.

As the budget's ominous trajectory makes clear, by asking government to do everything, it will, in the end, barely be able to do anything. Who, then, will have set us on a path back to the future, to the days when there were no effective federal safety net programs in place? Those who offer modernizing reforms to strengthen these programs? Or those who stand on the sideline, tearing ideas down rather than proposing credible alternatives – all while the programs themselves drown in debt?

The issue is not whether we ought to “zero out the state” or whether “all government action is automatically dismissed as quasi-socialist.” The issue is rather more subtle and sophisticated than that. The real debate is about whether and how government ought to create the foundations for growth and prosperity, securing a safety net for those who need it most; about how government can act now to avert a catastrophe later.

The truth is that there are two stark, competing philosophies over this matter. I know better than most that the debate will at times be uncomfortable and unpleasant. In ordinary times, political debate concerns the means, not the ends, of government. But we do not live in ordinary times; we live in a time when the first principles of governing are on the table. Nor did we seek this debate; bipartisan failures of the past and our current leaders' acceleration of their agenda have forced America to make this choice. So we cannot advance to the “day after tomorrow” until we decide today what kind of government we want our nation to have after tomorrow. And that is, right now, an open question.