



THE BLOG 06/07/2010 06:25 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

Tom Friedman Wants to Raise Your Taxes



By Marty Kaplan

There are basically two views of the American people.

In one, we're the patriots ready to do whatever it takes for our country. If a crisis requires sacrifices, we won't flinch when our leaders summon us to make them. We're the people FDR asked not only to fight and die for freedom, but also to pay higher taxes on profits, "to forgo higher wages" and "spending money for things that we want... which are not absolutely essential." We rise to the challenge and ask what we can do for our country.

In the other, we cry bloody murder when anyone tries to take anything away from us. We're entitled to benefits, but we're outraged by costs. We're the mob pointing fingers at everyone but ourselves, the sheep that demagogues herd toward outrage, the puppets that political candidates spend hundreds of millions of dollars to con with outrageous attacks on their opponents and preposterous promises of their own.

For 40 years, the arena where these schizoid embodiments of our nature have battled most ferociously has been energy policy.

In the 1970s, President Carter declared that America's "intolerable dependence on foreign oil threatens... the very security of our nation," and that "every act of energy conservation... is an act of patriotism." In the last year of his presidency, he advocated a course of "pain" and "discipline" including a fee on imported oil that would raise gasoline taxes 10 cents a gallon. The reaction? A hundred thousand copies of the *Boston Globe* hit the street the next morning containing an editorial about the speech under the headline "More Mush From the Wimp" before the prank was discovered and the title changed to "All Must Share the Burden." Take your pick: Sacrifice is for wimps; sacrifice is for patriots.

At the start of the next century, Dick Cheney dismissed conservation as "a sign of personal virtue," and in the days after 9/11, George Bush told America to go shopping. In the decade since then, *New York Times* columnist and best-selling author Tom Friedman has pounded on the failure of that administration to use 9/11 to summon Americans to sacrifice and greatness.

Bush blew a priceless opportunity to slam the brakes on America's dependence on foreign oil and to stop financing terrorism with American petrodollars. What he should have done, says Friedman, was to slap a \$1-a-gallon "Patriot Tax" on gasoline, then selling at \$1.66. With Obama elected, Friedman renewed his call for a tax on gas or carbon. "Today's financial crisis," he said at the end of 2008, "is Obama's 9/11." Now the BP disaster has given Friedman a new peg for his case: "The oil spill is to the environment what the subprime mortgage mess was to the markets — both a wake-up call and an opportunity to galvanize a constituency for radical change that overcomes the powerful lobbies and vested interests that want to keep us addicted to oil." As the Senate takes up the energy bill this week, expect more calls for a carbon tax from Friedman, as well as from his fellow *Times* op-ed columnists who also have signed on to that solution: David Brooks, Nicholas Kristof and Bob Herbert.

But so far, Obama hasn't done that. In a speech last week at Carnegie Mellon University, he called for "putting a price on carbon pollution," which has been interpreted as an endorsement of the alternative, complex-to-explain "cap-and-trade" system in the energy bill passed by the House last year. The reason he won't step up to a carbon tax, says Friedman, is political cowardice.

Channeling Malia Obama, he wrote, "'Daddy, why can't you even mention the words 'carbon tax'?" The answer is Obama's fear that Republicans will kill Democrats in the midterm elections by reminding Americans that he wants to raise their taxes. But as Friedman points out, Republicans have already turned "cap-and-trade" into "cap and tax." Whatever Obama supports, and no matter how tepidly he supports it, and no matter how much he tries to hide behind Congress's skirts, the Republicans will continue savaging Obama as a tax-raiser, and the energy industry — freed by the Supreme Court to buy unlimited campaign ads — will spend whatever it takes to hammer that message home.

Friedman says Obama can beat them. "The people are ahead of the politicians," he says. We have to abandon "the paralyzing notion that the American people are not prepared to do anything serious to change our energy mix." A carbon tax won't pass unless Obama "gets behind it with all his power, mobilizes the public and rounds up the votes. He has to lead from the front, not the rear." If he summons, as Lincoln did, "the better angels of our nature"; if he tells the truth, as FDR did; if he asks us to step up and do the right thing, as Bush didn't — if Obama leads, we will follow.

On some days, I believe that. I think Americans will reward sober, brutal honesty way more often than political operatives give them credit for. I think we're yearning to enlist in the war on our dependency on foreign fossil fuel. I think that the bully pulpit, especially as wielded by Obama when he chooses, can be an awesome force.

But on other days, I think there's an empirical basis for politicians' unwillingness to stick their necks out, to give ammunition to their opponents, to be cautious with words and votes. Americans are not only the people who rose to Roosevelt's challenge. We are also the people who give Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck their ratings. I want to believe that we're not the manipulable morons that political ads presume we are, that our educations and our news media are effective countervailing forces against demagoguery. But then I also believed that Americans would reward Walter Mondale for telling the country that cutting the Regan deficit required repealing the Reagan tax cuts for the rich. No voter in that 1984 election can forget the 49-state blowout that followed.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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Marty Kaplan 

USC Annenberg professor and Norman Lear Center director