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Romney and the 47%

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 18, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Over the summer, when the GOP attacked President Obama for ?dividing America? I thought the charge laughable. For all my problems with this President, I do not think any fair-minded person could charge him with responsibility for the increasing polarization and partisanship in DC or beyond the Beltway. It was not Obama who shouted ?You lie!? at a member of Congress during the State of the Union. It was not Obama who said, as Sen. Mitch McConnell did, that his over-riding objective was not to strengthen the country but to defeat the other party. And, beyond Washington, it was the Tea Party on the right that created such memorable moments as the anti-Obamacare rally that featured someone with a sign: ?No gov?t run health care: Hands off my Medicare.?

The reason Mr. Romney and Mr. Ryan and a host of other GOP stars repeated the charge is because unaffiliated voters, or independents, really hate partisanship and gridlock. These voters are not primarily ideological but pragmatic ? after all, if you are an ideologue on the Second Amendment or on upholding Roe, you know which party to join. These are the people that have not joined either party, the ones who say ?I vote for the person, not the party,? even though, in our system, you must vote for both. So, there is a political fact, distaste for excessive partisanship, and there is Obama. Might as well link the two, right? I would add that Obama made himself singularly susceptible to the charge by running a gauzy campaign in 2008 that promised he had the ability to transcend such partisan divisions, failing to see that by winning election, he would not be one of 100 senators, capable of chumming it up easily with Sen. Coburn, but the President, charged with leading his party as well as his country and no longer accessible for a chat in the cloakroom.

Well, it turns out that Mr. Romney sees the country as pretty divided too and, furthermore, that for him the important divisions are not between the Dems and the Republicans but between ?the makers and the takers? as David Brooks commented in his column this morning at the New York Times [1]. Mr. Romney was caught on camera saying that 47% of the country is not paying federal income taxes, but receiving government benefits, and that they are never going to vote for him anyway because they like the Obama administration?s lavish social programs and do not find Romney?s call for lower tax rates appealing because they don?t pay taxes anyway. ?This comment suggests a few things,? Brooks continues. ?First, it suggests that he [Romney] doesn?t really know much about the country he inhabits. Who are these freeloaders? It is the Iraq war veteran who goes to the V.A.? Is it the student getting a loan to go to college? Is it the retiree on Social Security and Medicare?? Mr. Romney dissed a lot of people with his dismissive comment, of course, not anyone at the country club unless they happen to run a company that is reliant upon one of the many schemes of corporate welfare.

Mr. Romney also fails to note that there are many millions of Americans who pay payroll taxes and sales taxes that amount to a higher rate of their income than the less-than-15% he has paid in income taxes. Mr. Romney does not need to pay payroll taxes at all because his income is investment income and as for sales tax, well, obviously we all pay that depending on the state in which we live, but for a person living near the poverty line, they are paying spending all their income and paying sales tax on those purchases. The wealthy do not pay sales tax when they stash away cash in, say, the Cayman Islands.

Those who do not pay any federal income tax mostly fall into three categories. Almost half simply do not earn enough money and some of these actually get refunds through the Earned Income Tax Credit, a program that was initiated by the Republicans and supported for more than forty years by presidents of both parties. About one quarter of those who do not pay federal income tax are seniors. They are not correctly seen as freeloaders but, instead, as those who have worked all their lives, now rely on Social Security, and have paid their fair share their whole life long. The final quarter are those who barely make enough to qualify for income tax payments, but who have enough kids that the child deduction offsets the amount they owe. Politico breaks down the numbers here [2].

There was one charge leveled at Romney that seems unfair to me. Last night, some MSNBC folks were criticizing him for saying that he doesn?t care about those he had characterized as free-loaders because they are not going to vote for him anyway. The suggestion was made that he does not care about these people at all, and will not as President. I do not think a fair reading of the transcript supports that conclusion. Mr. Romney was clearly speaking about his electoral chances with the poor and working poor, not his concern for them if elected. There is no need to interpret his remarks to make them more obnoxious than they actually were: They were plenty obnoxious already.

I do have one quibble with Mr. Brooks? column. His piece is entitled ?Thurston Howell Romney? a reference to the character on the TV sitcom ?Gilligan?s Island? who was noted for being very wealthy and very clueless. But, Thurston Howell also never lifted a finger to fix whatever problem the castaways faced. He was the free-loader, the one who just expected others to make things right. The comedy resided in the fact that the man of means was completely without the means his fellow castaways needed. Romney is certainly clueless at times and he is certainly wealthy at all times. But, there is nothing comical about him. Romney insulted the people who cleaned the hotel room he stayed in last night. He insulted the airplane mechanic who serviced his campaign plane and who makes a good wage but still needs college loans to help put his kids through college. He insulted the hard-working Moms who could not make ends meet without the child tax credit. He insulted the college students who volunteer to put up lawn signs and make phone calls on behalf of his campaign. He insulted the elderly who have worked their whole lives and who are entitled, yes entitled, to enjoy their twilight years without fear of losing their homes or their health care. There is no comedy in this divisive view of America.

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