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Which America Will We Be Now?

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For the past several years I've been taking every possible opportunity to talk about the soul of democracy. "Something is deeply wrong with politics today," I told anyone who would listen. And I wasn't referring to the partisan mudslinging, the negative TV ads, the excessive polling or the empty campaigns. I was talking about something fundamental, something troubling at the core of politics. The soul of democracy--the essence of the word itself--is government of, by and for the people. And the soul of democracy has been dying, drowning in a rising tide of big money contributed by a narrow, unrepresentative elite that has betrayed the faith of citizens in self-government.

But what's happened since the September 11 attacks would seem to put the lie to my fears. Americans have rallied together in a way that I cannot remember since World War II. This catastrophe has reminded us of a basic truth at the heart of our democracy: No matter our wealth or status or faith, we are all equal before the law, in the voting booth and when death rains down from the sky.

We have also been reminded that despite years of scandals and political corruption, despite the stream of stories of personal greed and pirates in Gucci scamming the Treasury, despite the retreat from the public sphere and the turn toward private privilege, despite squalor for the poor and gated communities for the rich, the great mass of Americans have not yet given up on the idea of "We, the People." And they have refused to accept the notion, promoted so diligently by our friends at the Heritage Foundation, that government should be shrunk to a size where, as Grover Norquist has put it, they can drown it in a bathtub.

These ideologues at Heritage and elsewhere, by the way, earlier this year teamed up with deep-pocket bankers--many from Texas, with ties to the Bush White House--to stop America from cracking down on terrorist money havens. How about that for patriotism? Better that terrorists get their dirty money than tax cheaters be prevented from hiding theirs. And these people wrap themselves in the flag and sing "The Star-Spangled Banner" with gusto.

Contrary to right-wing denigration of government, however, today's heroes are public servants. The 20-year-old dot-com instant millionaires and the preening, pugnacious pundits of tabloid television and the crafty celebrity stock-pickers on the cable channels have all been exposed for what they are--barnacles on the hull of the great ship of state. In their stead we have those brave firefighters and policemen and Port Authority workers and emergency rescue personnel--public employees all, most of them drawing a modest middle-class income for extremely dangerous work. They have caught our imaginations not only for their heroic deeds but because we know so many people like them, people we took for granted. For once, our TV screens have been filled with the modest declarations of average Americans coming to each other's aid. I find this good and thrilling and sobering. It could offer a new beginning, a renewal of civic values that could leave our society stronger and more together than ever, working on common goals for the public good.

Already, in the wake of September 11, there's been a heartening change in how Americans view their government. For the first time in more than thirty years a majority of people say they trust the federal government to do the right thing at least "most of the time." It's as if the clock has been rolled back to the early 1960s, before Vietnam and Watergate took such a toll on the gross national psychology. This newfound respect for public service--this faith in public collaboration--is based in part on how people view what the government has done in response to the attacks. To most Americans, government right now doesn't mean a faceless bureaucrat or a politician auctioning access to the highest bidder. It means a courageous rescuer or brave soldier. Instead of our representatives spending their evenings clinking glasses with fat cats, they are out walking among the wounded.

There are, alas, less heartening signs to report. It didn't take long for the wartime opportunists--the mercenaries of Washington, the lobbyists, lawyers and political fundraisers--to crawl out of their offices on K Street determined to grab what they can for their clients. While in New York we are still attending memorial services for firemen and police, while everywhere Americans' cheeks are still stained with tears, while the President calls for patriotism, prayers and piety, the predators of Washington are up to their old tricks in the pursuit of private plunder at public expense. In the wake of this awful tragedy wrought by terrorism, they are cashing in. Would you like to know the memorial they would offer the thousands of people who died in the attacks? Or the legacy they would leave the children who lost a parent in the horror? How do they propose to fight the long and costly war on terrorism America must now undertake? Why, restore the three-martini lunch--that will surely strike fear in the heart of Osama bin Laden. You think I'm kidding, but bringing back the deductible lunch is one of the proposals on the table in Washington right now. And cut capital gains for the wealthy, naturally--that's America's patriotic duty, too. And while we're at it, don't forget to eliminate the corporate alternative minimum tax, enacted fifteen years ago to prevent corporations from taking so many credits and deductions that they owed little if any taxes. But don't just repeal their minimum tax; refund to those corporations all the minimum tax they have ever been assessed.

What else can America do to strike at the terrorists? Why, slip in a special tax break for poor General Electric, and slip inside the EPA

while everyone's distracted and torpedo the recent order to clean the Hudson River of PCBs. Don't worry about NBC, CNBC or MSNBC reporting it; they're all in the GE family. It's time for Churchillian courage, we're told. So how would this crowd assure that future generations will look back and say "This was their finest hour"? That's easy. Give those coal producers freedom to pollute. And shovel generous tax breaks to those giant energy companies. And open the Alaska wilderness to drilling--that's something to remember the 11th of September for. And while the red, white and blue waves at half-mast over the land of the free and the home of the brave--why, give the President the power to discard democratic debate and the rule of law concerning controversial trade agreements, and set up secret tribunals to run roughshod over local communities trying to protect their environment and their health. If I sound a little bitter about this, I am; the President rightly appeals every day for sacrifice. But to these mercenaries sacrifice is for suckers. So I am bitter, yes, and sad. Our business and political class owes us better than this. After all, it was they who declared class war twenty years ago, and it was they who won. They're on top. If ever they were going to put patriotism over profits, if ever they were going to practice the magnanimity of winners, this was the moment. To hide now behind the flag while ripping off a country in crisis fatally separates them from the common course of American life.

About Bill Moyers

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