

June 10, 2008

The immorality of our national debt

By Andrew L. Yarrow

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"Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt," Herbert Hoover quipped 80 years ago. Today, the United States has \$9.4 trillion in federal debt and another \$50 trillion in unfunded government promises to future generations. Some joke.

What this represents is a fiscal millstone for future generations and a moral travesty for all of us.

Many philosophers - and even some politicians - have recognized that social morality is ultimately about stewardship: preserving a good world for future generations. Such thinking, deeply rooted in our culture, has gained new traction in discussions of climate change. Parallels with federal debt and our economic future are obvious. The Greek root for ecology and economy is the same; oikos means "home."

If we trash our home for our grandchildren, hasn't our moral compass gone haywire? Are our short-term desires - driving ozone-destroying cars or spending beyond our means - blinding us to consequences for Americans living 30 or 50 years from now?

Just as climate change is not only an environmental issue, debt is not only an economic issue. Both are profoundly moral. And the way to capture the public's attention and achieve results on these issues is to address them in forthrightly moral terms. We should not shy away from pointing out what is right and what is wrong.

The debate about our nation's fiscal problems - frequently deceptive and drearily laden with statistics - is on the wrong track. Debt is a moral issue; by any objective standard, it is wrong to beggar your children.

To hammer home the message that we must reduce government debt and bring spending and revenues into line, citizens and leaders need to reframe the issue. Sex scandals and embezzlement are moral small potatoes compared with robbing future generations. While most people don't yet see the issue that way, recent research shows that otherwise complacent Americans become outraged and galvanized to action when the debt crisis is presented as a moral one, rather than in the policy minutiae of changing Social Security benefit formulas or toughening budget process rules.

"It's a terrible thought knowing that my generation will have to pay for mistakes made before we were even able to vote," said a 20-year-old participating in a new college-based Public Agenda initiative about federal fiscal issues. This isn't intergenerational war - yet - but the sense that the powers that be have forfeited their moral authority is growing and is firmly based in fact.

Our culture's Judeo-Christian tradition offers powerful counsel on this subject, words that we should not be afraid to wield. The biblical book of Proverbs, for example, warns that "the borrower is servant to the lender," and Psalms 37:21 offers the more pointed injunction that "the wicked borrow and don't pay back."

How does all this apply to policy choices? In countless ways. Leaders should speak the language of moral indignation to push a real reform agenda: increasing the Social Security eligibility age, indexing benefits to price (not wage) inflation and establishing carve-out personal retirement accounts because these are the right things to do for our kids. Speak of sacrifice (whose Latin root means "sacred") for future generations when advocating taxes on those most able to pay; raising the Social Security payroll tax cap, the Medicare Part A tax rate and Medicare Part B premiums; and introducing consumption, carbon and higher gas taxes. Evoke the prophetic tradition in explaining the need for practical reforms such as slashing corporate welfare, imposing stricter budget rules and gradually moving from the current Medicare model of paying for health care for the elderly to a system, like Massachusetts', of universal health insurance that is mandated and publicly subsidized for those with the greatest economic need.

Leaders and educators also need to better teach Americans about the nature and causes of debt, its potential consequences and solutions. Educational initiatives about our nation's fiscal future could galvanize citizens to demand change. This should be as much preaching as teaching - ethics as much as economics. It should be a mix of fire and brimstone (the dangers), inspiration (the paths to a better future) and fiscal facts and policy choices.

As theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said: "The ultimate test of a moral society is the kind of world it leaves to its children." Let that be our inspiration and our goal.

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