

ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

By Harold Meyerson
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As battle cries go, the Tea Party's "Take our country back" is a pretty good one. It's short and punchy, and it addresses a very widespread sense that the nation that Americans once lived in has changed, and not for the better.

When the Tea Partiers get around to identifying how America has changed and to whose benefit, however, they get it almost all wrong. In the worldview of the American right -- and the polling shows conclusively that that's who the Tea Party is -- the nation, misled by President Obama, has gone down the path to socialism. In fact, far from venturing down that road, we've been stuck on the road to hyper-capitalism for three decades now. The Tea Partiers are right to be wary of income redistribution, but if they had even the slightest openness to empiricism, they'd see that the redistribution of the past 30 years has all been upward -- radically upward. From 1950 through 1980, the share of all income in America going to the bottom 90 percent of Americans -- effectively, all but the rich -- increased from 64 percent to 65 percent, according to an analysis of tax data by economists Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez. Because the nation's economy was growing handsomely, that means that the average income of Americans in the bottom 90 percent was growing, too -- from \$17,719 in 1950 to \$30,941 in 1980 -- a 75 percent increase in income in constant 2008 dollars.

Since 1980, it's been a very different story. The economy has continued to grow handsomely, but for the bottom 90 percent of Americans, it's been a time of stagnation and loss. Since 1980, the share of all income in America going to the bottom 90 percent has declined from 65 percent to 52 percent. In actual dollars, the average income of Americans in the bottom 90 percent flat-lined -- going from the \$30,941 of 1980 to \$31,244 in 2008.

In short, the economic life and prospects for Americans since the Reagan Revolution have grown dim, while the lives of the rich -- the super-rich in particular -- have never been brighter. The share of income accruing to America's wealthiest 1 percent rose from 9 percent in 1974 to a tidy 23.5 percent in 2007.

Looking at these numbers, it would be reasonable to infer that when the Tea Partiers say that they want to take the country back, they mean back to the period between 1950 and 1980, when the vast majority of Americans encountered more opportunity and security in their economic lives than they had before or since. Reasonable, but wrong. As the right sees it, America's woes are traceable to the New Deal order that Franklin Roosevelt, working in the shadow of the even more sinister Woodrow Wilson, imposed on an unsuspecting people.

In fact, the New Deal order produced the only three decades in American history -- the '50s, '60s and '70s -- when economic security and opportunity were widely shared. It was the only period in the American chronicle when unions were big and powerful enough to ensure that corporate revenue actually trickled down to workers. It marked the only time in American history when, courtesy originally of the GI Bill, the number of Americans going to college surged. It was the only time when taxes on the rich were really significantly higher than taxes on the rest of us. It was the only time that the minimum wage kept pace (almost) with the cost of living. And it was the only time when most Americans felt confident enough about their economic prospects, and those of their nation, to support the taxes that built the postwar American infrastructure.

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Since the ascent of Ronald Reagan, though, America's claim to being a land of opportunity has become a sick joke. Unions have dwindled; colleges have become unaffordable; manufacturing has gone abroad; taxes on the rich have plummeted; our infrastructure has decayed.

But the country the right wants to return to isn't the America that the Greatest Generation built. Judging by the statements of many of the Republican and Tea Party-backed candidates on next Tuesday's ballots, it's the America that antedates the New Deal -- a land without Social Security, unions or the minimum wage. It's the land that the Greatest Generation gladly left behind when they voted for and built the New Deal order. All of us should want our country back, but that country should be the more prosperous and economically egalitarian nation that flourished at the time when America was not only the world's greatest power, but also a beacon to the world.

meyersonh@washpost.com