

Who's the Socialist Now, Mitt?

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I have to confess, there is a part of me that has always liked Mitt Romney. I have liked him because he is proof that the American electorate is not as dumb as a lot of pundits and experts seem to believe. If American voters, particularly Republican primary voters, were as gullible and easy to manipulate as many in the media and blogosphere think, than Romney, because of his money, good looks and willingness to say just about anything to get elected would have been more than a footnote to the 2008 campaign.

Unfortunately, Romney's expensive failure in the 2008 presidential campaign was not the last we have heard from the former liberal Republican governor of Massachusetts turned standard bearer for the far right. In the last few weeks, Romney has resurfaced helping to lead the Republican charge against President Obama's effort to pass a stimulus bill and help point the American economy towards recovery. Romney's reasons for opposing the stimulus are not that different from what we have heard from most Republicans: government spending is bad, tax cuts are the answer to everything, helping poor people is socialism and the usual nonsense that passes for economic policy from the party that essentially created this mess.

Romney, however, summed up neatly what has become one of the signature issues of the post-Bush Republican Party, opposition to capping the salaries of senior executives at firms that have essentially been bailed out by the US government. Romney told *Time* magazine, "I am very uncomfortable with government dictating the course for managing an enterprise. This should be done by the shareholders and by the board of directors, not by the Federal Government." One is tempted to let the absurdity of this statement speak for itself, but just to be on the safe side. Mr. Romney, these are not private enterprises anymore. These firms will receive substantial amounts of government support and therefore can no longer claim to be independent from the state. I suspect that Mr. Romney is bright enough to realize this, but is unwilling to let empirical facts get in the way of a good ideological rant.

It speaks a great deal to the Republican Party that in the midst of an economic downturn that is probably greater than anything most of us have seen in our lives, they have chosen one of their major issues to be the right of some Americans to make virtually unlimited salaries. If the argument were this simple, as Mitt Romney seems to suggest, one would be able to assert that the Republicans were making a principled and important, if unpopular, argument about protecting freedoms during a time of crisis. However, the argument is, as usual, not as simple as Romney's verbal sleight of hand would lead us to believe. Romney is, essentially, arguing that those among the very rich who depend on the government for their survival should be allowed to make as much money as they want. American history is checkered with examples of socialism for the rich, but rarely has it been so blatant and offensive.

The Republican Party will almost certainly not succeed in stopping this stimulus bill, but they have already succeeded in weakening it. While that is unfortunate, it is also part of the democratic process, and perhaps somewhat unavoidable. Fortunately, the American people, the same ones who weren't taken in by Mitt Romney in 2008, aren't buying it now either. Support for the Republican position is weak as most Americans are anxious to get a stimulus bill and turn our economy around. Moreover, continuing to oppose government support for a faltering economy and to support obscene salaries for executives of government supported businesses is an unlikely recipe for rebuilding the party of Lincoln.

During the campaign, such eminent economic minds as Sarah Palin and Joe the Plumber told us that Barack Obama was a socialist because, apparently, there is a magic percentage of the tax rate for high income Americans, somewhere around 38%, which if you believe should be higher makes you a socialist. Now, the Republicans have moved the bar. Being a socialist is no longer defined by how much you think we should tax the richest Americans, but by being unwilling to give virtually unlimited amounts of money to failed executives of failed businesses. Romney's protestations aside, Barack Obama, like it or not, is not a socialist. He is trying to do something similar to what President Roosevelt did more than 70 years ago, to save capitalism, not destroy it.