

Putting What Where? Trying to Understand McCain's Slogan

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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Political slogans are usually vague and devoid of any real meaning. Neither Obama's nor McCain's slogan are any real exception to this. However, there is something particularly disturbing about the slogan "putting country first." When I first saw it I winced, but attributed that to the slogan being so embarrassingly childish, although in fairness I don't think any of the students in my son's 4th grade class would come up with something quite so meaningless. It also struck me as a bad riff on Bill Clinton's 1992 slogan "putting people first."

As I reflect upon it, it strikes me that there is something else about this slogan that I find troubling. Like any good slogan, it is hard to determine what, precisely, is meant by "putting country first," particularly from a ticket whose vice presidential candidate chose to use a nationally devised debate to suggest that paying taxes is somehow "not patriotic." It also seems like a strange slogan from a party that, at least in its rhetoric, is committed to individual freedoms and rights.

"Putting country first" obviously suggests that Republicans, and McCain specifically, are more patriotic than Democrats generally, and Obama specifically. While this is objectively speaking nonsense, one can't get too angry or surprised by this. Getting angry or surprised by Republicans calling Democrats unpatriotic is like getting angry or surprised at a tiger for having stripes. Similarly, it seems to suggest that Obama is driven by ambition while McCain is driven by pure patriotism, but this also standard Republican rhetoric about which we cannot get too upset.

The more serious question raised by a slogan like "putting country first" is "ahead of what?" In 1992, most people could assume that "putting people first" meant putting people ahead of profits. Regardless of whether or not that was an accurate description of Clinton's economic policies, or even of the economic problems facing the US at that time, the point of the slogan was clear. However, there the McCain-Palin slogan is far less clear on this question.

There are, of course, times when "putting country first" is an honorable thing to do. All of the people in the military who have made great sacrifices particularly those who have been injured and killed while serving their country, regardless of the wisdom of the war itself, have "put country first" and should be recognized for doing that. Clearly McCain's individual heroism while a POW in Vietnam was a similar case of "putting country first."

In civilian life, however, the notion of "putting country first" is somewhat more troubling. To a great extent, the whole point of the USA, and the source of much of its greatness, is that we don't put country first. We put individuals, social and group goods, and even specific national goals first, but these are different than the abstract idea of "putting country first." If we were to, as a society, put country first, who would define what "country" is or what putting it "first" might

mean? The answer presumably is John McCain, but this opens the door for a style of governance that would likely be intolerant of dissent and would accuse all dissenters of not "putting country first." We saw where this approach got us during the last eight years. Perhaps all of us, particularly the country McCain seeks to put first, would be better served by putting rational decision making, a better understanding of the world, or the rule of law first.

The notion of "putting country first" also suggests the presence of a greater good, or that we should all be working for the glory of our country above all individual desires and needs. The strength of American style democracy is that it is not about seeking greater goods, but about individuals seeking to pursue their own goals within the context of freedom, equality and rule of law. In many respects, part of the true genius of James Madison and others was to rid our democracy of the goal of achieving a greater good, but to instead focus on avoiding the tyranny often results from seeking this greater good. It is indeed shocking that a Republican candidate for president doesn't understand this.

While patriotism and sacrifice are values that are central to good governance, democracy and to what has made our country great, "putting country first" has historically been the approach not of those who would celebrate the individual's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as our founding fathers put it, but of those who would take these things away in the name of an abstract idea like "country." The distinctions between patriotism, and placing the good of the state over the good of the individual is indistinct, but of critical import. It is also undermined by slogans like "putting country first." John McCain should understand this, but somehow has decided to use this slogan anyway.