

HIS VIEW: Partiers finally wake up to Uncle Sam's debt

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Posted on: Thursday, July 02, 2009



Independence Day is fast approaching, so if you're not robotically igniting fireworks, this might be a good time to reflect on life in these United States.

According to some participants of Saturday's Taxed Enough Already (TEA) rally in Pullman, Americans are losing their grasp on liberty, the Constitution and our system of free enterprise.

"People need to know what's going on and how close we are to being a socialized country," one TEA Party participant told the Daily News.

Maybe she was talking about Medicare, or Medicaid, or that money-for-nothing retirement program known as Social Security. Or maybe not. But c'mon, is life in the U.S.A., as we know it, really in jeopardy?

I spent some time behind the Iron Curtain in 1981, long before the Soviet Union imploded, so I have an inkling of what actual socialism looks like. Trust me, capitalist enterprise in contemporary America is in no danger of being eclipsed by socialism.

Granted, these are hard economic times, but our national cup is well over half full. It's not overflowing like it was three years ago, but many Americans can quench their thirst for the good life. Ask around in Bulgaria and you'll find most folks are still coming up dry.

I applaud the TEA Party people for their civic engagement, but there's a Rip Van Winkle quality to their sudden activism.

If they're so concerned about fiscal responsibility in government, then where were they during the golden fleece years from 2000 through 2006? That's when Congress, ostensibly controlled by the party of fiscal restraint, kept handing blank checks to a president who ran up the tab like no one else in American history.

Where were the TEA Party people when America's foray into Iraq - originally billed as revenue-neutral thanks to oil sales - began incinerating hundreds of billions of our tax dollars?

Where were the TEA Party people when lack of financial oversight finally caught up with, and hobbled, America's once-robust economy? My retirement savings took a sickening dive when Wall Street tanked, and I'll bet yours did too.

Our TEA Party pals doubtless were delighted with the 43rd president's zeal for tax cuts. Most wage earners on the Palouse saw their taxes go down by a few hundred bucks. It was welcome, but it also was a penny-wise, pound-foolish way to squander the federal surplus that accumulated during the late 1990s.

Those tax cuts were great for seriously wealthy people, but not for you, or me, or anyone who punches a time clock.

And now, thanks to dubious leadership, America is deeply in debt. The interest we're paying on that debt is money that could have been spent to reduce health care costs, or college tuition, or some other social good.

Instead, we're spending it on debt service. The lost opportunity costs are similar to those resulting from credit card debt - you can't afford to buy a big-screen TV, and Uncle Sam can't afford to solve pressing social problems.

Our new president is trying to confront some of those problems. I wish him luck, but I'm withholding applause until I see change I can believe in.

He started off in a deep hole, with the economy in full retreat and expensive military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. Like the Cat in the Hat, he's juggling those challenges while simultaneously grappling with a difficult national issue: the high cost of health care.

Only now do the TEA Party people pipe up with their faux grass-roots activism. Their talking points - the same from Seattle to Miami - didn't bubble up from below, they were

handed down from above. Just call the TV stations, wave a few signs and, presto, instant public indignation.

These folks were played like a fiddle by the last occupant of the Oval Office. As conservatives continue to lose the political high ground, the TEA Party "patriots" are being played yet again.

William Brock lives in Pullman with his wife and family.