



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on July 20, 2012

Obama's Rhetoric

Barack Obama's great rhetorical gifts include the ability to make the absurd sound not only plausible, but inspiring and profound.

His latest verbal triumph was to say on July 13th, "if you've been successful, you didn't get there on your own." As an example, "Somebody invested in roads and bridges. If you've got a business — you didn't build that. Somebody else made that happen."



Let's stop and think, even though the whole purpose of much political rhetoric is to keep us from thinking, and stir our emotions instead.

Even if we were to assume, just for the sake of argument, that 90 percent of what a successful person has achieved was due to the government, what follows from that? That politicians will make better decisions than individual citizens, that politicians will spend the wealth of the country better than those who created it? That doesn't follow logically — and certainly not empirically.

Does anyone doubt that most people owe a lot to the parents who raised them? But what follows from that? That they should never become adults who make their own decisions?

The whole point of the collectivist mindset is to concentrate power in the hands of the collectivists — which is to say, to take away our freedom. They do this in stages, starting with some group that others envy or resent — Jews in Nazi Germany, capitalists in the Soviet Union, foreign investors in Third World countries that confiscate their investments and call this theft "nationalization."

Freedom is seldom destroyed all at once. More often it is eroded, bit by bit, until it is gone. This can happen so gradually that there is no sudden change that would alert people to the danger. By the time everybody realizes what has happened, it can be too late, because their freedom is gone.

All the high-flown talk about how people who are successful in business should "give back" to the community that created the things that facilitated their success is, again, something that sounds plausible to people who do not stop and think through what is being said. After years of dumbed-down education, that apparently includes a lot of people.

Take Obama's example of the business that benefits from being able to ship their products on roads that the government built. How does that create a need to "give back"?

Did the taxpayers, including business taxpayers, not pay for that road when it was built? Why should they have to pay for it twice?

What about the workers that businesses hire, whose education is usually created in government-financed schools? The government doesn't have any wealth of its own, except what it takes from taxpayers, whether individuals or businesses. They have already paid for that education. It is not a gift that they have to "give back" by letting politicians take more of their money and freedom.

When businesses hire highly educated people, such as chemists or engineers, competition in the labor market forces them to pay higher salaries for people with longer years of valuable education. That



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education is not a government gift to the employers. It is paid for while it is being created in schools and universities, and it is paid for in higher salaries when highly educated people are hired.

One of the tricks of professional magicians is to distract the audience's attention from what they are doing while they are creating an illusion of magic. Pious talk about "giving back" distracts our attention from the cold fact that politicians are taking away more and more of our money and our freedom.

Even the envy that politicians stir up against "the rich" is highly focussed on those particular high income-earners whose decisions the politicians want to take over. Others in sports or entertainment can make far more money than the highest paid corporate executive, but there is no way that politicians can take over the roles of Roger Federer or Oprah Winfrey, so highly paid sports stars or entertainers are never accused of "greed."

If we are so easily distracted by self-serving political rhetoric, we are not only going to see our money, but our freedom, increasingly taken away from us by slick-talking politicians, including our current slick-talker-in-chief in the White House.

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