

Collective Misery is the Prescription for Failure

☒ About a year ago, I was going through a pretty rough time in my life. Having barely survived *Recovery Summer*, the once thriving company that had employed me for 15 years was about to go out of business. Twelve hour work days and substantial pay-cuts weren't enough to keep us above water. The job market was awful and I was receiving few callbacks on my resume. Two evenings a week, I'd find myself across town, wrapped up in the two to three hour process of donating my blood plasma to earn some extra money. When I'd get home, often after my kids were already in bed, I'd sit in front of my laptop and put sports merchandise up for bid on eBay. I knew unemployment was right around the corner and I wanted to put myself in the best possible financial position to support my family during that time.

A few weeks later, the company did go under and I was out of a job. It was scary. I felt like I had the weight of the world (my world, anyway) pressing down on my shoulders. Friends and family offered their best wishes and words of encouragement.

Someone close to me sent me a well-meaning email during that time. In it, he wrote, "If it's any consolation, there's A LOT of people out there who are going through the same thing." I remember reading those words with a scowl on my face and thinking, *Is he serious? How could that possibly make me feel any better?* A few days later, someone else made almost the exact same remark to me. Once again, I found the statement puzzling. Why would I take comfort in the knowledge that many others were going through the same hardships that I was? Why would I find that even remotely satisfying? I'd much rather have everyone else be doing just fine. I'd much rather be the exception than the rule.

I suppose it's a statement on our culture – that collective suffering is supposed to somehow make us feel better about ourselves. It's no wonder that we've become so dependent as a nation. When enough people are handed defeats, defeatism becomes acceptable, even an inevitability... and we look to others to save us.

We see this brand of group-think in the Occupy protesters. We hear it in their messaging – “We are the 99%”. The collective nature of their grievances substantiates (in their minds) the notion that they're victims, and that those who aren't (the wealthy) are to blame. Thus, the rich owe something to the less fortunate.

This is certainly the mindset the Obama administration is counting on in hopes of winning a second term. You see it in their relentless pursuit of the class warfare strategy that ironically can only be successful if the economy remains weak, jobs remain sparse, and people remain resentful of those who are succeeding. In that sense, it seems the administration has given up on things getting better as well.

This viewpoint is exactly why our country has become “soft” as President Obama puts it. It's not because we've run out of ideas or lost the capacity to innovate. It's because we've been conditioned to sell ourselves short, and have been coaxed into believing that our fate is largely in the hands of others.

Unfortunately, the longer this goes on and the more dependent people become, the harder it is to convince them that the power of the individual is the key to prosperity in this country. Wealthy people have achieved their success by rising above collectivism and apathy. They've carved out their own niche, innovated, worked hard, taken risks, and achieved self-reliance. These are the people we should be supporting as a society, because with their success comes opportunity for the rest of us.

And *opportunity* is a key term that has been missing from the national debate. We hear a lot of promises about forecasts and outcomes because people want to hear the bottom line and be comforted, but opportunity is not about guaranteed outcomes. It's about setting an environment for success and leaving it up to individuals to seize the moment and advance themselves.

But misery loves company. At least that's the message of the Obama administration. By dividing us into groups based on our income brackets and stoking the envy of those on the low end of the scale, they're emboldening collective anguish instead of emboldening individualism. And they're only doing it because they believe it to be a smart campaign strategy, not because they believe it's good for the nation.

People like to be empathized with. Maybe it's human nature. But once we've bought into the notion that collective misfortune is a foregone conclusion without dependence on others, we've truly lost the American spirit of individualism that has historically been the catalyst for success in this great country. And the faster we discard those who try to sell us on the merits of dependence, the better.