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Romney Isn't Concerned

By PAUL KRUGMAN

If you're an American down on your luck, Mitt Romney has a message for you: He doesn't feel your pain. Earlier this week, Mr. Romney told a startled CNN interviewer, "I'm not concerned about the very poor. We have a safety net there."

Faced with criticism, the candidate has claimed that he didn't mean what he seemed to mean, and that his words were taken out of context. But he quite clearly did mean what he said. And the more context you give to his statement, the worse it gets.

First of all, just a few days ago, Mr. Romney was denying that the very programs he now says take care of the poor actually provide any significant help. On Jan. 22, he asserted that safety-net programs — yes, he specifically used that term — have "massive overhead," and that because of the cost of a huge bureaucracy "very little of the money that's actually needed by those that really need help, those that can't care for themselves, actually reaches them."

This claim, like much of what Mr. Romney says, was completely false: U.S. poverty programs have nothing like as much bureaucracy and overhead as, say, private health insurance companies. As the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities has documented, between 90 percent and 99 percent of the dollars allocated to safety-net programs do, in fact, reach the beneficiaries. But the dishonesty of his

initial claim aside, how could a candidate declare that safety-net programs do no good and declare only 10 days later that those programs take such good care of the poor that he feels no concern for their welfare?

Also, given this whopper about how safety-net programs actually work, how credible was Mr. Romney's assertion, after expressing his lack of concern about the poor, that if the safety net needs a repair, "I'll fix it"?

Now, the truth is that the safety net does need repair. It provides a lot of help to the poor, but not enough. Medicaid, for example, provides essential health care to millions of unlucky citizens, children especially, but many people still fall through the cracks: among Americans with annual incomes under \$25,000, more than a quarter — 28.7 percent — don't have any kind of health insurance. And, no, they can't make up for that lack of coverage by going to emergency rooms.

Similarly, food aid programs help a lot, but one in six Americans living below the poverty line suffers from "low food security." This is officially defined as involving situations in which "food intake was reduced at times during the year because [households] had insufficient money or other resources for food" — in other words, hunger.

So we do need to strengthen our safety net. Mr. Romney, however, wants to make the safety net weaker instead.

Specifically, the candidate has endorsed Representative Paul Ryan's plan for drastic cuts in federal spending — with almost two-thirds of the proposed spending cuts coming at the expense of low-income Americans. To the extent that Mr. Romney has differentiated his position from the Ryan plan, it is in the direction of even harsher cuts for the poor; his Medicaid proposal appears to involve a 40 percent reduction in financing compared with current law.

So Mr. Romney's position seems to be that we need not worry about the poor thanks to programs that he insists, falsely, don't actually help the needy, and which he intends, in any case, to destroy.

Still, I believe Mr. Romney when he says he isn't concerned about the poor. What I don't believe is his assertion that he's equally unconcerned about the rich, who are "doing fine." After all, if that's what he really feels, why does he propose showering them with money?

And we're talking about a lot of money. According to the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center, Mr. Romney's tax plan would actually raise taxes on many lower-income Americans, while sharply cutting taxes at the top end. More than 80 percent of the tax cuts would go to people making more than \$200,000 a year, almost half to those making more than \$1 million a year, with the average member of the million-plus club getting a \$145,000 tax break.

And these big tax breaks would create a big budget hole, increasing the deficit by \$180 billion a year — and making those draconian cuts in safety-net programs necessary.

Which brings us back to Mr. Romney's lack of concern. You can say this for the former Massachusetts governor and Bain Capital executive: He is opening up new frontiers in American politics. Even conservative politicians used to find it necessary to pretend that they cared about the poor. Remember "compassionate conservatism"? Mr. Romney has, however, done away with that pretense.

At this rate, we may soon have politicians who admit what has been obvious all along: that they don't care about the middle class either, that they aren't concerned about the lives of ordinary Americans, and never were.



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