

Jeb Bush on the 2012 dividing line

By William McKenzie

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There was another National Center for Policy Analysis event this week, and this time Jeb Bush was the speaker. The vast majority of the former Florida governor's address Thursday dealt with education issues. But at the end he offered a comment about the 2012 election that I thought was on the mark.

He said that this election was coming down to how you view success. Is your emphasis on punishing those who have made it economically or is it upon equipping people who aspire to a better life?

As with all bright line statements, there can be exceptions and nuance. And I will talk in a minute about one of the worries I have about the equipping/entrepreneurial side of the line, which is where I am. But I think Bush was right.

Here's why:

Listen to President Obama's speeches, and see how much of the emphasis is placed upon taxing the wealthy and spending more on programs than it is on creating opportunities for entrepreneurs and controlling the deficit.

Note I said "emphasis." In no way, do I think Obama is a socialist. But neither do I think he is a Bill Clinton-like Democrat, who, deep down, appreciates the role of small businesses, wealth creators and entrepreneurs.

If he really got them, I think we would hear a lot more about them from him. And not in a qualified way, which is how Obama often strikes me when he is talking about people making it. (His State of the Union address was an exception. And I applaud him for it. I especially liked that he talked about strengthening schools to improve our economy.)

But listen to how much time he spends talking about the Warren Buffett rule, taxing the wealthy or the greed of a few. He certainly hit those themes in his speech in Kansas in December, which he used to spotlight a new fighting populism. That's a different approach from talking about getting all boats to rise.

On the other side of the divide, there's Romney, who is speaking more to the entrepreneurial side of the equation. That's because he has spent most of his career in the marketplace. To the extent

he can use that experience to talk about what it takes to make it there, and leave the GOP's social/cultural agenda alone, he will help himself in a general election.

Of course, Romney has to get to a general election. Perhaps he won't. But if he does get the nomination, he can speak authoritatively to America's broad entrepreneurial class -- and what it takes to succeed economically.

Now, here's my worry about my side of the equation:

It is very easy for prosperous people to think that they are entitled to their wealth or that they are God's chosen. If you take what Bush said to an extreme, it can lead to a modern prosperity gospel. If you are making a ton, you must be pretty good.

To me, that was the problem with Reaganism. It had too much economic royalism running through it. George H.W. Bush, by contrast, talked about us being about more than the sum of our possessions while still promoting a growth agenda.

So, while I favor the equip/entrepreneurial side, I think those of us on this half of the divide in this election need to remind those who have made it that they need to serve the larger community, not just sit idly by and relax in one's riches.

But I think Bush was right in his framing of this election. How you view success is the big dividing line of 2012.