Give, Share, and Take are not Synonyms

A major cornerstone of the US rule of law comes from the definition and enforcement of property rights. Long before the nation’s founding, private property had been recognized under British common law. The British did not invent private property either, as the concept goes back as long as recorded history. Once private property was recognized, the following came into view:

**Share**: to have or use (something) with others

In order for sharing to occur, one who owns private property must permit another to also have use of the property. They don’t forgo the use of the property themselves. If a kindergarten teacher told Peter to share his toy truck with Paul, then Paul could play with the truck along with Peter, but Paul could not exert ownership of the truck. Paul could not take it home and exclude Peter from playing with it. People often use the term “share” when what they mean is “give”.

**Give**: to make a present of; to put into the possession of another for his or her use

If Peter wants to make a present of his toy truck to Paul, then Paul would indeed have the right to take home the truck and exclude Peter from playing with it. It may not be nice of Paul to do so, but it would be his right. Peter benefits from this transaction if he feels warm and fuzzy that he was able to voluntarily transfer ownership of his property to Paul for Paul’s pleasure. Perhaps Peter considers Paul to be a friend and Paul’s increased happiness makes Peter happy. If it does not make Peter happy to give his truck to Paul, Paul might well go home without a truck unless he takes Peter’s.

**Take**: to get into one’s hands or into one’s possession, power, or control

If while Peter was playing with his truck in front of Paul, Paul decided that he really wanted Peter’s truck, he could take it from Peter (providing he is stronger than Peter, or the kindergarten teacher agrees that Paul should get Peter’s truck and is more powerful than Peter). Much like the scenario where Peter gave his truck to Paul, by taking Peter’s truck with enforcement from the teacher, Paul gains exclusive control of the use of the truck. Paul can prevent Peter from coming to Paul’s house and playing with the truck. The key difference is that Peter is unlikely to feel better as a result of the taking. Why might Paul take Peter’s truck and therefore deprive Peter the option of sharing/giving his truck with/to Paul?

**Covet**; to feel inordinate desire for what belongs to another

Covetousness is specifically listed as a sin in the 10 Commandments. That means that as long as people have claimed private property, others have looked enviously at their neighbors’ stuff. As a result, much of government’s early role was dedicated to the protection of property rights from foreign invasion and thieves (the two largest groups of covetous people). While taxes were not levied equally on everyone, everyone could share in the benefit from the protection of property rights.

Through time governments expanded their scope to encompass the provision of public goods such as roads, aqueducts, gardens, parks, and public buildings. While tax revenues were assessed to people at various levels, all could share in the benefit the public goods provided. Rich and poor travelers alike could use the road between market towns. Only after the implementation of the personal income tax did the US federal government use federal tax revenues in earnest for roads, sewers, parks, and public infrastructure.

Ever since the New Deal (and in large part due to the Great Society), the nature of government has changed. The federal government has been collecting larger amounts of tax revenue while dedicating smaller and smaller portions of the spending to the provision of public goods and the protection of property rights.

In 2013, only 3% of the federal budget was spent on transportation and infrastructure. Defense spending totaled 19% of all federal spending. By contrast, 24% was spent on Social Security, 12% on safety net programs, and 22% on subsidized personal health care. By 2014 more than 2//3 of all federal spending was taken and given rather than taken and shared. The US federal government first morphed from being the chief protector of property rights into the chief sharer of property. More recently they have morphed again into the chief taker and giver of property.

When Paul buys a steak with his food stamps, Peter is not invited to Paul’s house to share the steak with him. When Paul receives free medical visits, Peter does not get his blood pressure checked as well. When Paul gets a check in the mail from the government, he does not have to buy Peter so much as a thank you card.

While politicians continue to talk about using the tax code for people to share their income/wealth with others, they have been dramatically changing their behavior. The US federal government does a lot of taking and very little sharing anymore. They take from Peter to give to Paul rather than allowing Peter to give to Paul or even making Peter share with Paul.

This is why our public infrastructure is crumbling and politics has become more divisive. Government has replaced taking and sharing (which unites people around common public interests) with taking and giving (which deprives people the joy of giving while losing common public goods). Those that were happy sharing are much less happy giving, and those who used to have to share are now never satisfied with what they are able to take.