



An Introduction to the Kitchen Table Agenda

*By Ernest Istook--#1 in a Series**

For 2012 and beyond, America's course will be set by whoever wins the hearts and minds of the middle class. Many feel caught and confused in the tug-of-war between the left and the right.

But conservatives' old standby argument of low taxes doesn't work anymore for most Americans—because most no longer pay federal income taxes.

Appealing solely to national interest won't win votes unless it's accompanied by appeals to self-interest. That's challenging because the middle class has been targeted to receive ever-growing government benefits. Less obvious is that they're paying dearly, not through direct taxes but through taxes on business that are passed on plus out-of-control regulations that make everyday things unaffordable or unavailable.

To succeed, conservatives must demonstrate how big government is destroying family budgets—an agenda that resonates at the kitchen table where families sit down to review finances and make decisions.

The left has lost credibility because economic security is slipping away and the all-embracing arms of Big Brother government are a poor substitute.

But frustration with government does not guarantee victory for conservatives because so many millions of Americans—now a majority of them—have been excused from federal income taxes. Therefore a tax-centered message lacks appeal to their self-interest.

The conservative cause already has support from most who are committed to constitutional limits on power, to personal responsibility and to robust national defense, or who inherently distrust big government. But that's insufficient for a winning coalition. **What's lacking is a demonstration of how limited government brings personal benefit to everyday Americans. And how big government wrecks family budgets.**

Whether it's rising gasoline prices or falling stock prices, the federal government bears culpability. The federal role in rendering health care unaffordable is a huge untold story. So is the tale of the Washington quota system that dictated massive mortgage lending to those who could not afford to buy homes—sparking the mortgage meltdown that launched our current economic mess.

We have job-killing EPA mandates. Plus fuel-mileage dictates that drive car prices through the roof and make passengers less safe—all to save on gasoline that would be affordable if we were permitted to drill in our own country and offshore. Then we subsidize ethanol that lowers fuel economy while it raises the cost of food.

Appliances become unaffordable. Obama even admitted his plans will make energy prices skyrocket.

Federal loans and grants are supposed to make college more affordable—but instead have contributed to ever-escalating costs.

The list goes on. We're surrounded by big government programs that supposedly rescue us from a multitude of costly problems. But too often those problems were caused by a government that's out-of-control.

**In a series of papers from Ernest Istook, former Congressman and now Distinguished Fellow at The Heritage Foundation, the Steamboat Institute will help outline how big government is destroying the purchasing power of today's families, which is often more destructive than raising their taxes.*