Cutting Out the Poor

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I've lived long enough to understand that the differences among Americans are often greatly exaggerated -- that deep down we are a lot more alike than we are different.

This truth extends to politics no less than to matters of race and class and geography. If you think of American politics as a dial, even during our fiercest debates, the needle swings in relatively small arcs -- from a bit right of the midpoint to a bit left of it, and back again. No matter how alarmed we may get over some particular setback, it's usually true that the sky really isn't falling.

Well something is coming down.

I've been talking to Peter Edelman, a Georgetown University law professor who is thoughtful, liberal, incredibly decent -- and alarmed over the national budget President Bush will shortly propose.

"For virtually all of my adulthood," he said, "America has had a bipartisan agreement that we ought to provide some basic framework of programs and policies that provide a safety net, not just for the poor but for a large portion of the American people who need help to manage.

"There've been exceptions -- the first Reagan term with David Stockman, the brief ascendancy of Newt Gingrich -- but while we've argued about the specifics, the basic framework has been there.

"With this budget, the basic framework is being dismantled."

Before you dismiss it as partisan hyperbole, hear Edelman's specifics: The basic structure of Social Security is under attack (on the grounds that the program is in crisis, though most respected economists say it isn't). Pell Grants for college tuition are on the cutting block. So are Section 8 housing vouchers (which started under Richard Nixon) and food stamps. Programs that have offered some protection for people in the lower third of the economy are under threat of evisceration.

And the rationale for the attack is a budgetary crisis created by the gift of \$1.8 trillion in tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans.

Edelman thinks the needle has jumped off the dial altogether, that the people in philosophical power are determined to abrogate the contract many of us still take for granted. Nor does he believe that it is a matter of fiscal necessity. An unnecessary tax break (abetted by an optional war) created the crisis, and now the crisis justifies a radical reordering

of the American system. As Edelman and Deepak Bhargava, executive director of the Center for Community Change (CCC), put it in a recent joint statement:

"The federal budget is not just an accounting tool. It is a statement about our priorities and our values as a nation. But because of decisions this president made to benefit an elite few -- at the expense of the rest of us -- we're now facing a set of budget choices that are unsupportable, immoral and dangerous."

The CCC, on whose board Edelman sits, has formed a coalition of more than 100 low-income groups in 15 states to resist not just the individual program cuts but also the philosophy underlying the cuts.

Resistance won't be easy, since so many middle Americans see their interests as nearer those of the rich than of the poor. Besides, the cuts will certainly be marketed -- perhaps successfully -- as simple practical necessity. I mean, if there's a fiscal crisis in these parlous times, you surely wouldn't want to cut defense -- or veterans, or highways, or police. Hmm, looks like those programs for poor folks are about the only option.

It is important, says Edelman (who quit the Clinton administration in a protest against the push to radically downsize public assistance), not to look at this budget program by program but at the thoroughgoing reordering of the government's role. He sees it as a major advance of the goal articulated by the influential conservative Grover Norquist of shrinking government "to the size where you could drown it in a bathtub."

"We're talking about tens of billions of dollars in cuts, including many programs that, like nutrition, are in-kind income for people," Edelman said. "We're talking about a severe blow for millions of Americans who are working as hard as they possibly can but still need some help."

Well, why don't we just wait and see if things turn out as badly as some of us fear? And if they do, then let the government reenact some of the old social programs.

The lovely thing -- at least from the Norquist view -- is that there won't be much the radically downsized government could do about it. That darned fiscal crisis, you know.