A sense of entitlement?

By David Heim
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Politicians in Washington invariably use the term "entitlements" to refer to programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. On the face of it, it's a neutral term: citizens are entitled to certain benefits if they fit a certain category of need, hence the benefits might reasonably be called "entitlements."

Yet the word carries ideological freight—an implication that people are lazy or self-indulgent to expect these things. Exploiting that vein, Mitt Romney used to complain about an "entitlement society" that fosters dependency, which he contrasted to an "opportunity society" that fosters initiative.

The negative implication of entitlement has been around for a few decades, according to the folks at the Language Log website. The negative meaning seems to have been fostered by psychologists who used the phrase "sense of entitlement" to describe people who operate with an overblown sense of what they deserve in life.

Budget talks would be much clearer if the references were not to entitlements but to the social safety net, for that is exactly what these programs constitute. Politicians should come out and say it: "We've got to find some way to reduce the size of that safety net." "We just can't afford this much of a safety net." At least then we'd know what they are talking about and could ask the real questions: how much of a net do people need, and what happens when it gets cut?

The people who receive entitlements are not lazy and self-indulgent. They are, overwhelmingly, people who are retired (and probably worked all their lives) or have a disability (and are unable to work) or are working but need supplementary income to care for dependents.