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Against Compromise

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 8, 2011 Distinctly Catholic

I am all for political compromise in normal circumstances. Indeed, our system was designed to require compromise, moderating ideologies, forcing diverse, changing interests to work together to achieve anything. The competition of interests is, in fact, now understood to be one of the greatest guarantees of liberty in our great democracy, and if that competition does not end in compromise, it can all too easily end in disaster.

That said, the effort of the bipartisan ?Gang of Six? [1] to address the problem of the nation?s long-term debt is deeply troubling. ?Everything is on the table? is the mantra of these Senators who include such stalwart conservatives as Tom Coburn and such stalwart liberals as Dick Durbin. But, should everything be on the table or, better to ask, how are these issues being put on the table?

In the 1980s, Democrats responded to the Reagan Revolution by moving to the center. The Democratic Leadership Council embodied the shift and the candidacy and presidency of Bill Clinton confirmed it. But, the Democrats did not shift to the center on all issues, they shifted only on economic issues. On social issues, responding to well organized groups like NOW and NARAL and the emerging gay rights movement, Democrats stayed hard to the left. But, on trade issues, and tax issues, and issues of government regulation, they moved to the center.

At the same time, the Republicans did not move at all. And, in the wake of 9/11, any effort to curb runaway defense spending was taken off the table as Democrats feared being tagged, as they were in the 2002 midterms, as aiding and abetting the terrorists. Indeed, Republicans today are dominated by their most extreme elements while Democrats remain dominated by the kind of centrism that emerged in the late 1980s. So, any compromise between the two parties, any ?middle ground? is going to be further to the right than it would, or should, be.

Additionally, the current fiscal mess combines both long-term and short-term difficulties. The short-term difficulties are the result of a recession that began under President George W. Bush but, unlike the Great Depression of 1929, the pain of the downturn was not felt until power had changed hands in Washington. President Obama has had to live with the mess, just as Franklin Roosevelt had to live with the mess, but Roosevelt had the advantage that for the pain of the Depression had been felt, and felt deeply, for three full years before he took the oath of office. Everyone knew who was to blame for the Depression: Hoover and the Republicans. The popular understanding of the most recent downturn is far less discriminating.

Poll after poll shows that the American people, when given a choice, would prefer to see, for example, a surtax on millionaires rather than any cuts in Social Security or Medicare. So, instead of saying ?everything is on the table? and crafting some grand compromise behind closed doors in the Senate, the Democrats should begin laying out a series of choices that will define the 2012 elections ? and elections beyond 2012.

Democrats must memorize the phrase, ?But not until.? They must say, we are willing to consider raising the retirement age for full Social Security benefits, but not until we have removed the cap on FICA taxes. They must say, we are willing to consider cuts in Medicare, but not until marginal tax rates return to the levels at which they were on the day Ronald Reagan left office. They must say, we are willing to lower Social Security

benefits, but not until the tax giveaways for corporate interests have been expunged from the federal tax code. They must say, we are willing to consider lowering the value of the home mortgage tax deduction, but not until that deduction is ended for second, usually vacation, homes.

This is vital for the resurgence of the Democratic Party and, not coincidentally, the middle and working classes. The problem with a ?grand compromise? is that it becomes a take-it-or-leave it proposition when, on each of the particular choices such a compromise would include, the voters side with the Democrats. Nor is there any great rush to move on entitlement spending: Social Security and Medicare are not about to run out of money and, as the due dates approach, people will like the prospects of changing those entitlements even less. And, if the Democrats feel the need to appear more moderate, let them shift on social issues back to the center.

The party of Franklin Delano Roosevelt was built on concern for the little guy. The Republicans have, since Reagan, argued that they are defending the little guy?s values, staking out conservative positions on social issues while throwing the economic interests of the common man under the bus. The Democrats must recognize that their dominance of the political landscape for the forty years of the New Deal Coalition was rooted in their ability to speak for, and legislate on behalf of, the average worker. They must reclaim that heritage or they will deserve to be a minority party. Everything may be on the table, but some things should only be on the table once this country has shifted away from the laissez-faire economic orthodoxy that Reagan articulated, Bush perfected, and the Tea Party celebrates. The Democrats must articulate a vision for the Common Good, as FDR did, and argue for the little guy, the guy who does not have an army of lawyers and lobbyists and campaign contributors in Washington. This is not a time for compromise. It is a time for choices.

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