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Fiscal Cliff Negotiations Revisited

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 29, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I was distressed this morning to see the headline on my friend E. J. Dionne?s column: ?Democrats need their own Grover [1].? Of course, writers do not select their own headlines, editors do that, so E.J. is not responsible for this headline, nor does his article really claim that Democrats need a liberal equivalent of Mr. Norquist, the Jerry Falwell acolyte of the modern GOP not because of his stance on social issues but because of his fundamentalism about taxes.

The last thing the Democrats need is our own Grover Norquist. Better than an ideological enforcer is an ideologically coherent policy embraced by a majority of the electorate, or what we used to call the New Deal Coalition. In fact, while the Republican Party continues to fight over its future, deciding whether it will be a far right party or a far-far right party, the ideological center is there for the Democrats to grab. One of the reasons the President is holding better cards than the congressional Republicans in the fiscal cliff negotiations is because he just won an election in which the issue of raising taxes on the wealthy and returning to the Clinton-era tax rates was a point of contention and Obama won. Another reason is that even more Americans think raising taxes on the wealthy makes sense than voted for Obama. A third reason, and most important reason for my argument her is the math: You can?t get the budget headed towards any kind of balance without raising taxes on the wealthy.

This last point about math is not so much ideological, or at least it need not be cast as ideological. The ideological center of American is defined by its lack of ideology. If you are really, really committed, as a matter of principle, to smaller government or the Second Amendment, chances are you are a Republican. If the environment is your major issue, or union rights, chances are you are a Democrat. Those in the middle are pragmatists. They do not harken to one issue, they do not see the world in absolutist terms, they tend to be low-information voters, they bristle at any hint of unreasonableness. They want solutions. Remember Ross Perot saying he was going to fix the government?s budget problems the way he would fix a car, by looking under the hood? He was speaking to those centrist, non-ideological voters. He lost, of course, not least because of his own eccentricities, but he twice kept Bill Clinton from securing a majority of the popular vote.

I am deeply suspicious of pragmatism, and not just in its rarefied, intellectual garb as a philosophy but in the cultural effects it produces, a kind of intellectual slovenliness that declines to look beneath the surface and, consequently, fails to see the ways in which any system of government, any economic structure, any judicial apparatus, all entail a view of the human person that cannot but be profoundly ideological. If your economic system requires competition rather than cooperation, if you legal system is based on common law or civil law, and if your government is premised on the separation of powers, all imply ideas about human nature that are consequential and ideological. Here endeth the sermon.

E.J.?s column actually does not go on to suggest that Democrats become fundamentalists. Instead, he argues that the Democrats should start by insisting that there be evidence for the actions that will be taken. He calls attention to Jonathan Cohn?s writings at the New Republic, in which Cohn points out that we as a nation have

placed a big bet on the idea that the Affordable Care Act will restrain the previously explosive increase in health care costs. If it does, we may not need to take an axe to Medicare and Medicaid. I do wish E.J. and others on the left would be a bit more forthcoming about ways to cut the cost of government programs. I simply can?t believe that there are not savings to be had, and not just by focusing on ?waste, fraud and abuse? which has been a charlatan for decades. Washington is all in a tizzy at the prospect of sequestration with its across-the-board cuts, and that is a stupid way to cut the budget, but there are also non-stupid ways to cut the budget. I do not doubt that the President could order his Cabinet officers to find ways to reduce their spending by even half a percentage point per year over the next four years, that would have a dramatic impact on out-year budget projections.

But, as E.J.?s column indicates, there remain competing ideas about what will be achieved by the various policy approaches and here is where the value of triggers can come in. Republicans say that you can?t raise money on people making more than $250,000 because those people are the job creators and we all agree that we need more jobs. I do not think the GOP argument holds water. But, instead of splitting the difference between GOP stasis and the Democrats desire to raise the highest rate by four points, why not raise the rate by one percentage point this year, and increase it to the full four points when unemployment gets below 6 percent. Triggers can also work to address stalemates over entitlement spending: For example, if the ACA does not reduce health care inflation, then provisions like means? testing or raising the age of eligibility will be introduced.

I think that better than having a liberal equivalent of Grover Norquist, the Democrats need to have a president who is deeply committed to publicly articulating and defending his policies. Obama was not very good at this in his first term and it cost him. I have noted this before, but do you remember the beautiful little girl, who had a pre-existing condition, and who joined her mother on stage at the Democratic National Convention as her Mom explained how the ACA saved the little girl?s life. I remember her but I can?t remember her name. If the administration had done its job, its political job, of selling the ACA by putting a human face on it, so that everyone in America knew that little girl?s name the way everyone in America came to know the name Ryan White, the ACA would have much wider support then it does now. And, what is more, if Obama and his team had done that in 2009 and 2010, they might not have been wiped out in the midterm elections in 2010. That wipeout not only cost them control of the House, it cost them many key governorships and control of state legislatures so that Republicans were in charge of the redistricting process in several states, control that they turned to their advantage such that in this most recent elections, if you tally up all the votes cast for members of Congress, more votes were cast for Democrats than for Republicans, but Republicans maintain control of the lower chamber. There is nothing nefarious about it. That is how the system works, but it was President Obama?s failure in 2010 to defend his own policies that led to this result. He cannot make the same mistake again.

So, there is much to be done. According to an article in Politico [2], a deal on the fiscal cliff appears to be taking shape and, if that report is true, the deal appears balanced, even shapely! At the end of the day, the most important thing we can do for the future fiscal health of the nation is get the economy moving again, and that means that almost any deal is better than no deal at all. But, the central player here is not Mr. Norquist. It is President Obama.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/ej-dionne-ignore-grover-norquist-but-learn-from-him/2012/11/28/acee576e-3995-11e2-8a97-363b0f9a0ab3_story.html
[2] http://www.politico.com/story/2012/11/84364.html?hp=t1