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In (Partial) Defense of Obama

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Critics who attack the president for "surrendering" to Republicans are being naïve about the difficulties of pushing policies through a divided House



Many liberals are furious with President Obama over the policies in the debt ceiling deal. But, as usual, their critique--Paul Krugman's is one example--ignores, or is naïve about, the hard realities of divided congressional politics.

When a "yes" vote was required to extend the ceiling, how should the president have negotiated with a Republican House which had been transformed by the 2010 election

and which had a sizable number of ideologically driven republican members who wanted to say "no"? That is the key question.

In 2010, the Republicans, recall, gained 63 seats--the most by an opposition party in the mid-term election since 1938--with most new members sharing one idea: restrain spending. By analogy, in 1994, Republicans gained 54 seats, took back the House and made the Clinton presidency largely defensive and impotent until after the 1996 elections.

We are witnessing for the umpteenth time liberal criticism that ignores the diversity in our political system and the dispersion of power in our constitutional system. From time

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immemorial, Democratic presidents are harshly criticized by liberals for deviating from their "one true faith", without much regard for politics. Invariably, they say, if the president had taken a principled public position, he would have mobilized the "base" and countered the forces of darkness (i.e. those with whom they don't agree), but they don't offer a cogent political analysis. As in this case. To repeat, how should Obama have negotiated with a transformed House of Representatives when he needed their assent?

Exhibit A of liberal fury on policy accompanied by little political analysis was Krugman's column the day after the deal: ["The President Surrenders."](#) In the harshest possible language, Krugman roasts the policy and the President. On the politics, he says that the prior Democratic Congress, in its waning days, could have extended the debt limit in December 2010 (true, but the Democratic Congressional leadership, at the time, wanted the Republicans to bear some responsibility). Elsewhere in the piece, he says that the administration should have threatened to use questionable authority in the 14th Amendment to raise the debt limit unilaterally, even though the great weight of authority believes such a reading of the constitution is wrong.

A more sophisticated critique of Obama is offered by Bill Galston [in the New Republic](#). Although qualifying his arguments with the acknowledgment that he does not have a clear view of the politics as viewed from the White House, he says that the president missed two opportunities (in addition to extension of the debt limit last December). Obama should have endorsed the results of his own Simpson-Bowles deficit reduction plan last December and built support for it through his budget and through bully pulpit. Obama also should have not raised the tax revenue ante from \$800 billion to \$1.2 trillion in his \$4 trillion grand bargain negotiations with Speaker Boehner, which happened

Galston says, citing news reports not his own information, after the "Gang of Six" Senate proposal included the higher "revenue" amount.

But Galston's analysis doesn't address the hard-nut of the problem. Would any of this have mattered to the strongly ideological new members of the Republican House? For some, ideological purity may matter more than re-election. How this voting bloc crucial to House passage would act is not discussed in any detail. But that is where the problem lies. John Boehner had "apparent" trouble with this bloc, as his final dead on arrival debt ceiling/debt reduction proposal shows. I say "apparent" because in these situations there is a huge amount of disinformation, phony moves, and game-playing on both sides. And that is where hard political analysis is so important.

But, if you were President Obama, facing the possibility of a default and potentially catastrophic economic consequences, it is not so easy to call the possible bluff of the Republican House in a negotiation where you must have House approval. The Republicans might have blinked to be sure. Or the ideological purists might have taken the country gladly over the cliff, with the attendant earthquake in the global economy. If you were president, would you have taken that risk or taken a messy deal?

But many liberals don't want to discuss the politics of this negotiation where one House of the Congress has a large majority and blocking power. Far easier, as always, to hurl ideological imprecations down upon the president (how about Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid folks?). And to ignore the fact that the deal is basically a mess for everyone--with most of the hard decisions affecting both our fiscal policy and our faltering economy kicked down the road.

To be sure, those on the Democratic side can have a spirited debate about the policies and the politics of Obama presidency which came into office facing terrible conditions caused by the worst decade of public and private leadership in years. For example, how much did he contribute to the Republican wipe-out in November, 2010?

But, one thing is for sure. Spouting policy vitriol from the comfy confines of an office at Princeton is not going to solve problems in a deeply divided country with strongly held views across the political spectrum. In our system, policy only become important when joined with the power of politics. And that power, ultimately, is in elections.

Liberals should be working every congressional and senatorial race, starting yesterday. Grass roots politics against conservatives, not Olympian op-eds against President Obama, is the best answer for liberal critics of the debt-ceiling deal.

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