

# The Debt Deal and the Progressive Crack-Up

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By Peter Berkowitz

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The debt-limit crisis of 2011 brought the federal government harrowingly close to defaulting on its financial obligations. As the dust settles, it is more harrowing still to contemplate the implications of what the democratically negotiated settlement revealed about the panic of the progressive mind.

One might view the debt deal as evidence that democracy in America, though often unlovely in execution, is alive and well. After all, President Obama's \$800 billion-plus stimulus package was passed by Congress in early 2009 on a mostly party-line vote. It was followed in April by his \$3.5 trillion budget, enacted without a single Republican vote, that contained sizeable across-the-board funding increases for federal departments and agencies. The president devoted the next 12 months to passing costly and unpopular health-care legislation that dramatically increased government's responsibility for regulating approximately one-sixth of the nation's economy. Employment hovered at approximately 9% and still does.

In the congressional elections of 2010, the electorate, led by the tea party movement and disaffected independents, rendered its judgment on the president's priorities. The people dealt him and his party a historic midterm defeat, producing large Republican gains in the Senate and a comfortable majority in the House, including 87 freshmen.

The voters' message was clear: Cut spending, compel the government to live within its means, and put Americans back to work. In short, the president and his party badly overreached in 2009 and 2010; and in 2011 the Republicans, to the extent their numbers in Congress allowed, have effectively pushed back.

But that's not how progressives have tended to see things. They have ferociously attacked congressional Republicans, particularly those closely associated with the tea party movement, with something approaching hysteria.



From left to right: Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, Chris Dodd and Barney Frank ILLUSTRATION: Getty Images

Consider the unabashed incivility of progressive criticism, its tone dictated from the top. During and after the budget negotiations, we heard that tea party representatives were content with "blowing up our government" (Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne). Then came accusations that "Tea Party Republicans have waged jihad on the American people" (New York Times columnist Joe Nocera), while acting like "a maniacal gang with knives held high" (New York Times columnist Maureen Dowd). At the height of negotiations, Vice President Biden either said, or agreed with House Democrats with whom he was meeting who said, that Congressional Republicans "have acted like terrorists."

In addition, progressive legal scholars concocted a wild theory to justify an executive power grab by means of which President Obama would unilaterally raise the debt ceiling to avoid having to hammer out a deal with Congress.

Prominent among them was Yale Law School Professor Jack Balkin. He called attention to Section 4 of the 14th Amendment, which provides in relevant part that: "The validity of the public debt of the United States, authorized by law . . . shall not be questioned." Mr. Balkin argued that this Constitutional provision gives the president authority to raise the debt ceiling on his own, even though neither a debt ceiling nor a default calls into question the U.S's financial obligations under law; indeed, both presuppose the validity of the nation's public debt.

Progressive partisans also displayed economic illiteracy, refusing to recognize the respectability or even the existence of alternative economic views. Instead, they steadfastly insisted that a conservative obsession with reducing debt and curbing spending ignored the real issue, which was putting Americans back to work.

Summarizing the opinion of many progressives on the day after the debt ceiling was raised, House minority leader Nancy Pelosi declared, "Enough talk about the debt. We have to talk about jobs"—as if there was no connection, in the minds of conservatives or economists, between controlling the debt and creating jobs.

Yet the conservative position has been clearly stated by tea party movement activists, congressional Republicans, and House Speaker John Boehner, and it was affirmed in straightforward terms in a February letter to President Obama signed by 150 American economists: Reining in spending is crucial to generating real economic growth, spurring the private sector, and thereby producing jobs.

The use of crude and violent language to condemn conservatives as enemies of the state, the gross manipulation of law to make the Constitution say whatever is politically expedient, and indifference to the actual arguments made by their political opponents—these are all-too-familiar progressive vices. They were exercised with abandon in the fury with which progressives responded to the complex questions raised by the Supreme Court's decision in *Bush v. Gore*, the detention of enemy combatants at Guantanamo Bay, and the invasion of Iraq. Tea party hatred is the successor of and stems from the same sources as Bush hatred.

Of course, a good bit of progressive vituperation can be chalked up to the ordinary passions of democratic politics, which can be high stakes and is a contact sport. But in the debt-limit crisis, the hypocrisy of progressives reached truly breathtaking proportions.

How often they have haughtily lectured the nation on the vital importance of civility in public discourse, the urgency of constraining executive power under law, and the need for impartial expertise in public affairs to pragmatically weigh competing public-policy options. But in the debt-limit debate the virtues they profess could hardly have been more spectacularly absent.

The evident panic of the progressive mind stems from a paradox as old as progressivism in America. Progressives see themselves as the only legitimate representatives of ordinary people. Yet their vision of what democracy requires frequently conflicts with what majorities believe and how they choose to live.

Add to this the progressive belief that human beings can be perfected through the rule of experts, and you have a recipe—when the people make choices contrary to progressive dictates—for generating contempt among the experts for the people whose interests they claim to alone represent. And not just contempt, but even disgust at diversity of opinion, which from the progressive's perspective distracts the people from the policies demanded by impartial reason.

The progressive mind is on a collision course with itself. The clash between its democratic pretensions and its authoritarian predilections has generated within its ranks seething resentment for, and rage at, conservatives. Unless progressives cultivate the enlightened virtues they publicly profess and free themselves from the dogmatic beliefs that undergird their political ambitions, we can expect even more harrowing outbursts to come.

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