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# Are We Going to Roll Up Our Sleeves or Limp On?

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

It becomes clearer every week that our country faces a big choice: We can either have a hard decade or a bad century.

We can either roll up our sleeves and do what's needed to overcome our post-cold war excesses and adapt to the demands of the 21st century or we can just keep limping into the future.

Given those stark choices, one would hope that our politicians would rise to the challenge by putting forth fair and credible recovery proposals that match the scale of our debt problem and contain the three elements that any serious plan must have: spending cuts, increases in revenues and investments in the sources of our strength. But that, alas, is not what we're getting, which is why there remains an opening for an independent Third Party candidate in the 2012 campaign.

The Republicans have come nowhere near rising to our three-part challenge because the G.O.P. is no longer a "conservative" party, offering a conservative formula for American renewal. The G.O.P. has been captured by a radical antitax wing, and the party's leaders are too afraid to challenge it. What would real conservatives be offering now?

They would understand, as President Eisenhower did, that at this crucial hinge in our history we

cannot just be about cutting. We also need to be investing in the sources of our greatness: infrastructure, education, immigration and government-funded research. Real conservatives would understand that you cannot just shred the New Deal social safety nets, which are precisely what enable the public to tolerate freewheeling capitalism, with its brutal ups and downs.

Real conservatives would understand that we cannot maintain our vital defense budget without an appropriate tax base. Real conservatives would understand that we can simplify the tax code, get rid of all the special-interest giveaways and raise revenues at the same time. Real conservatives would never cut taxes and add a new Medicare entitlement in the middle of two wars. And real conservatives would understand that the Tea Party has become the Tea Kettle Party. It is people in real distress about our predicament letting off steam by trying to indiscriminately cut everywhere. But steam without an engine — without a strategic plan for American greatness based on spending cuts, tax reform and investments in tomorrow — will take us nowhere. Countries that don't invest in the future tend to not do well there. Real conservatives know that.

I've argued that the only way for Obama to expose just how radical the G.O.P. has become would be for the president to put out *in detail* his version of a credible "Grand Bargain" and then go sell it to the country. But that proposal had to include real long-term spending cuts in Medicare and Social Security so they can be preserved, tax reform that raises revenues by asking more of the rich — but also demands something from everyone — and an agenda for investing in our growth engines, like schools and infrastructure, right now to stimulate the economy today in ways that also increase our productivity for tomorrow. That plan should have been a combination of the Simpson-Bowles deficit reduction proposal and Mr. Obama's new jobs agenda announced last week.

Such a credible, fair "Obama Plan" for deficit reduction married to a credible jobs initiative would have captured America's radical center and made life very difficult for the G.O.P., which can't accept any tax increases and has no investment agenda other than tax cuts. It was the only chance for maneuvering the G.O.P. into a Grand Bargain.

Mr. Obama gave us the credible \$447 billion jobs program, but his deficit reduction plan announced on Monday to pay for it and trim long-term spending does not rise to the scale we need. It may motivate his base, but it will not attract independents and centrists and, therefore, it will not corner the Republicans.

As The Washington Post reported: “The latest Obama plan ‘doesn’t produce any more in realistic savings than the plan they offered in April,’ said [Maya MacGuineas](#), the president of the bipartisan [Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget](#). ‘They’ve filled in details, repackaged it and replaced one gimmick with another. They don’t even stabilize the debt. This is just not enough.’ The most disheartening development, MacGuineas and others said, is Obama’s decision to count \$1.1 trillion in savings from the drawdown of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan toward his debt-reduction total. Because Obama has no intention of continuing war spending at last year’s elevated levels, that \$1.1 trillion would never have been spent.”

A Financial Times editorial summarized my feelings: “American voters are not looking for champions of their preferred redistributive stance, but responsible attitudes to the country’s challenges. If Mr. Obama suggests a millionaire’s tax can save ordinary voters from pain, he will fail, economically and politically.”

My fading hope is that this is Obama’s opening bid and enough Republicans will come to their senses and engage him again in a Grand Bargain. My fear is that both parties have just started their 2012 campaigns. In which case, the rest of us will just sit here, hostages to fortune, orphans of a political system gone mad, hunkering down for a bad century.



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