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The President Is Missing

By PAUL KRUGMAN

What have they done with President Obama? What happened to the inspirational figure his supporters thought they elected? Who is this bland, timid guy who doesn't seem to stand for anything in particular?

I realize that with hostile Republicans controlling the House, there's not much Mr. Obama can get done in the way of concrete policy. Arguably, all he has left is the bully pulpit. But he isn't even using that — or, rather, he's using it to reinforce his enemies' narrative.

His remarks after last week's budget deal were a case in point.

Maybe that terrible deal, in which Republicans ended up getting more than their opening bid, was the best he could achieve — although it looks from here as if the president's idea of how to bargain is to start by negotiating with himself, making pre-emptive concessions, then pursue a second round of negotiation with the G.O.P., leading to further concessions.

And bear in mind that this was just the first of several chances for Republicans to hold the budget hostage and threaten a government shutdown; by caving in so completely on the first round, Mr. Obama set a baseline for even bigger concessions over the next few months.

But let's give the president the benefit of the doubt, and suppose that \$38 billion in spending cuts — and a much larger cut relative to his own budget proposals — was the best deal available. Even so, did Mr. Obama have to celebrate his defeat? Did he have to praise Congress for enacting “the largest annual spending cut in our history,” as if shortsighted budget cuts in the face of high unemployment — cuts that will slow growth and increase unemployment — are actually a good idea?

Among other things, the latest budget deal more than wipes out any positive economic effects of the big prize Mr. Obama supposedly won from last December's deal, a temporary extension of his 2009 tax cuts for working Americans. And the price of that deal, let's remember, was a two-year extension of the Bush tax cuts, at an immediate cost of \$363 billion, and a potential cost that's much larger — because it's now looking increasingly likely that those irresponsible tax cuts will be made permanent.

More broadly, Mr. Obama is conspicuously failing to mount any kind of challenge to the philosophy now dominating Washington discussion — a philosophy that says the poor must accept big cuts in Medicaid and food stamps; the middle class must accept big cuts in Medicare (actually a dismantling of the whole program); and corporations and the rich must accept big cuts in the taxes they have to pay. Shared sacrifice!

I'm not exaggerating. The House budget proposal that was unveiled last week — and was praised as “bold” and “serious” by all of Washington's Very Serious People — includes savage cuts in Medicaid and other programs that help the neediest, which would among other things deprive 34 million Americans of health insurance. It includes a plan to privatize and defund Medicare that would leave many if not most seniors unable to afford health care. And it includes a plan to sharply cut taxes on corporations and to bring the tax rate on high earners down to its lowest level since 1931.

The nonpartisan Tax Policy Center puts the revenue loss from these tax cuts at \$2.9 trillion over the next decade. House Republicans claim that the tax cuts can be made “revenue neutral” by “broadening the tax base” — that is, by closing loopholes and ending exemptions. But you'd need to close a lot of loopholes to close a \$3 trillion gap; for example, even completely eliminating one of the biggest

exemptions, the mortgage interest deduction, wouldn't come close. And G.O.P. leaders have not, of course, called for anything that drastic. I haven't seen them name any significant exemptions they would end.

You might have expected the president's team not just to reject this proposal, but to see it as a big fat political target. But while the G.O.P. proposal has drawn fire from a number of Democrats — including a harsh condemnation from Senator Max Baucus, a centrist who has often worked with Republicans — the White House response was a statement from the press secretary expressing mild disapproval.

What's going on here? Despite the ferocious opposition he has faced since the day he took office, Mr. Obama is clearly still clinging to his vision of himself as a figure who can transcend America's partisan differences. And his political strategists seem to believe that he can win re-election by positioning himself as being conciliatory and reasonable, by always being willing to compromise.

But if you ask me, I'd say that the nation wants — and more important, the nation needs — a president who believes in something, and is willing to take a stand. And that's not what we're seeing.



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