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The Impossible Dream

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

One of the most frustrating tendencies of mainstream leaders in the United States is their willingness, year after debilitating year, to embrace policies that have no hope of succeeding.

From Lyndon Johnson's mad pursuit of victory in Vietnam to George W. Bush's disastrous invasion of Iraq to today's delusionary deficit zealots, the tragic lure of the impossible dream seems never to subside.

Ronald Reagan told us he could cut taxes, jack up defense spending and balance the budget — all at the same time. How'd he do? As his biographer Garry Wills tells us, the Gipper "nearly tripled the deficit in his eight years, and never made a realistic proposal for cutting it."

President Obama is escalating the war in Afghanistan while promising to start bringing our troops home next summer, which is like a heavyweight boxer throwing roundhouse rights while assuring his opponent that he won't fight quite as hard after the eighth or ninth round.

I don't know if it's the drinking water or the rarefied air at the highest reaches of government that makes so many of our leaders go loopy. Whatever it is, we need to put a stop to these self-defeating tendencies. The U.S. is in sad shape, and most of the policy prescriptions being tossed around by the movers and shakers are bad ones.

To get a sense of how deeply entrenched the problems are, consider what passes for good news these days. The economy added 151,000 jobs last month, which was more than most economists had expected. But even at that rate of job growth, it would take 15 to 20 years to get the employment rate back to where it was when the Great Recession began in December 2007.

There is no time to waste on plans that can't succeed.

The deficit hawks want to radically cut budgets and shrink the government, which they assure us will not only get the economy moving again but will eventually bring budgets into balance as neatly as some ideal middle-class family balances its checkbook.

This will somehow be achieved, we're told, without raising taxes. And Senator Jim DeMint of South Carolina, a darling of the Tea Party, said on "Meet the Press" on Sunday that he was not in favor of cuts in benefits to senior citizens, meaning Social Security and Medicare, or any reductions in veterans' benefits.

You can't have a coherent conversation about deficit reduction if tax increases are off the table and the country is still at war. This is fantasyland economics, the equivalent of believing that John Boehner can fly.

People traveling in the real world understand that the federal budget deficits are sky high because of the Bush-era tax cuts, the costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the spending that was needed to keep the Great Recession from spiraling into another Great Depression.

Even if deficit reduction right now were a good idea — which it is not, given the sorry state of the economy and the vast legions of the unemployed — the deficit zealots have no viable plan for getting their misguided mission accomplished.

What's needed now is the same thing that has been needed for the past two years and more, a bold plan to put millions of Americans back to work and paying taxes, and a careful, thoughtful, strategic

but unequivocal withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq.

If we don't engage these two issues effectively, there is little hope of getting to the other enormous challenges facing the country, including the metastasizing presence of poverty, the worsening problems facing already chronically underperforming public schools, and the deteriorating economic and social conditions that have drained the vitality of so many cities, rust-belt communities and rural areas.

The golden doors of opportunity are closing on America's young. The United States, once the world's leader in the percentage of young people with college degrees, is now a sorry 12th among 36 developed nations, according to the College Board.

As a society, we've lost our way, and there is no chance of getting reoriented if we can't find the courage to make some really tough decisions about warfare, taxes, public investment, the crying need to educate all young people, and the paramount importance of gainful employment as the cornerstone of a revitalized America.

Great sacrifices will have to be made if the U.S. is to get its act together, and those sacrifices will have to be shared. We can start now, or we can wait and continue to fantasize about an eventual triumph in Afghanistan, or about cutting budgets with some magic cleaver until they're finally balanced and all's right with the world, or whatever other impossible dream is floated by the chronically dissembling political class to blind us to the real world.



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