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The Centrist Cop-Out

By PAUL KRUGMAN
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The facts of the crisis over the debt ceiling aren't complicated. Republicans have, in effect, taken America hostage, threatening to undermine the economy and disrupt the essential business of government unless they get policy concessions they would never have been able to enact through legislation. And Democrats — who would have been justified in rejecting this extortion altogether — have, in fact, gone a long way toward meeting those Republican demands.



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times

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As I said, it's not complicated. Yet many people in the news media apparently can't bring themselves to acknowledge this simple reality. News reports portray the parties as equally intransigent; pundits fantasize about some kind of "centrist" uprising, as if the problem was too much partisanship on both sides.

Some of us have long complained about the cult of "balance," the insistence on portraying both parties as equally wrong and equally at fault on any issue, never mind the facts. I joked long ago that if one party declared that the earth was flat, the headlines would read "Views Differ on Shape of Planet." But would that cult still rule in a situation as stark as the one we now face, in which one party is clearly engaged in blackmail and the other is dickering over the size of the ransom?

The answer, it turns out, is yes. And this is no laughing matter: The cult of balance has played an important role in bringing us to the edge of disaster. For when reporting on political disputes always implies that both sides are to blame, there is no penalty for extremism. Voters won't punish you for outrageous behavior if all they ever hear is that both sides are at fault.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. As you may know, President Obama initially tried to strike a

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“Grand Bargain” with Republicans over taxes and spending. To do so, he not only chose not to make an issue of G.O.P. extortion, he offered extraordinary concessions on Democratic priorities: an increase in the age of Medicare eligibility, sharp spending cuts and only small revenue increases. As The Times’s Nate Silver pointed out,

Mr. Obama effectively staked out a position that was not only far to the right of the average voter’s preferences, it was if anything a bit to the right of the average Republican voter’s preferences.

But Republicans rejected the deal. So what was the headline on an Associated Press analysis of that breakdown in negotiations? “Obama, Republicans Trapped by Inflexible Rhetoric.” A Democratic president who bends over backward to accommodate the other side — or, if you prefer, who leans so far to the right that he’s in danger of falling over — is treated as being just the same as his utterly intransigent opponents. Balance!

Which brings me to those “centrist” fantasies.

Many pundits view taking a position in the middle of the political spectrum as a virtue in itself. I don’t. Wisdom doesn’t necessarily reside in the middle of the road, and I want leaders who do the right thing, not the centrist thing.

But for those who insist that the center is always the place to be, I have an important piece of information: We already have a centrist president. Indeed, Bruce Bartlett, who served as a policy analyst in the Reagan administration, argues that Mr. Obama is in practice a moderate conservative.

Mr. Bartlett has a point. The president, as we’ve seen, was willing, even eager, to strike a budget deal that strongly favored conservative priorities. His health reform was very similar to the reform Mitt Romney installed in Massachusetts. Romneycare, in turn, closely followed the outlines of a plan originally proposed by the right-wing Heritage Foundation. And returning tax rates on high-income Americans to their level during the Roaring Nineties is hardly a socialist proposal.

True, Republicans insist that Mr. Obama is a leftist seeking a government takeover of the economy, but they would, wouldn’t they? The facts, should anyone choose to report them, say otherwise.

So what’s with the buzz about a centrist uprising? As I see it, it’s coming from people who recognize the dysfunctional nature of modern American politics, but refuse, for whatever reason, to acknowledge the one-sided role of Republican extremists in making our system dysfunctional. And it’s not hard to guess at their motivation. After all, pointing out the obvious truth gets you labeled as a shrill partisan, not just from the right, but from the ranks of self-proclaimed centrists.

But making nebulous calls for centrism, like writing news reports that always place equal blame on both parties, is a big cop-out — a cop-out that only encourages more bad behavior. The problem with American politics right now is Republican extremism, and if you’re not willing to say that, you’re helping make that problem worse.

David Brooks is off today.

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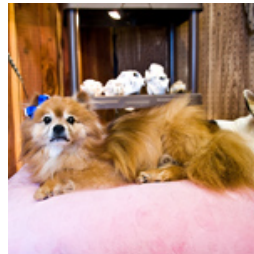
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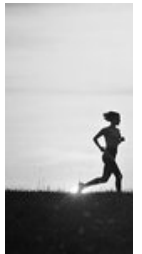
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