

"Fiscal Cliff" Madness: Why It's All or Nothing

Written by Thomas L. Knapp
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The other night (I was channel-surfing and don't remember which network, show or host was involved), I caught House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) talking about the "fiscal cliff" negotiations between the White House and congressional Republicans.

Paraphrased, the alternatives Pelosi posited in these negotiations were:

On one hand, raise taxes on "the rich" (Ohio Democratic Senator Sherrod Brown, like every other Democrat I've heard on the issue, dishonestly characterized this approach as "asking them to pay a little more" — taxes aren't something that are "asked" for).

On the other hand, run up more government debt and pass the costs on to the next generation.

The third alternative — cutting government spending — never made it on to the studio table.

The whining from both sides of the partisan aisle in Washington notwithstanding, there's nothing "draconian" about the cuts required to balance the federal checkbook with no changes in tax policy. Based on 2013 revenue projections, reducing federal spending to 2008 levels would balance that budget. Reducing it to 2006 levels would yield a \$300 billion surplus.

In fairness to Pelosi and the Democrats, that studio table isn't the only table such a proposal is missing from. It isn't on the real negotiating table either, because neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are willing to put it there.

Politicians are capable of — indeed, given to — sweeping visions and great excesses. It's hard to imagine a damn-fool scheme that someone in Washington won't take seriously and make an effort to move through the bowels of the legislature for eventual deposit on the president's desk.

But there's one idea that's deemed inadmissible in political proceedings: The idea that the size, scope and power of government could ever, in any particular or for any reason, be reduced by so much as an iota.

That idea isn't just dreaded and despised. It's literally unthinkable to the political class. So

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much so that politicians attempt to erase the concept from our political vocabulary by using words which would normally denote it for exact opposite purposes.

Thus when we hear of pending "draconian cuts" in this or that program, we can translate that as "slight reductions in the rate of growth" without fear of error. And we can know to a high degree of certainty that any reference to "austerity" applies only to the productive class and never, never, ever to the political class.

As other writers are fond of observing, political power is like a ratchet. You can turn it in either direction, but it only moves the socket one way. The back-turn is just an illusion. It's really the politicians putting on a show while they work up some more leverage to tighten the nut down on your life, liberty and pursuit of happiness. Or proximately, in the case of the "fiscal cliff," on your wallet.

Every state, from its founding, puts its feet on the path toward total statism. The nature of power is to harness itself — and its victims — to the accrual of more power. There may be fits and starts along the way, but never a departure from the path or a real reversal in direction absent popular rebellion and political collapse.

At this point, the United States is much closer to the end of that path than to its beginning. The "fiscal cliff" mugging is sham and theater, of no real import save to the extent that it masks the real question: Do we take this government down, or wait for it to take us down with it? There is no third alternative.