

MAKE ROOM IN THE CORNERS: THIS CONGRESS NEEDS A LONG TIMEOUT

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MIDWEST VOICES

How do they do it? Just when I thought my politicians couldn't be any more adorable, they turn around and charm the pants off of me!

Last Tuesday's debt-limit increase is the sort of public policy that makes my heart skip a beat. It's like an early Valentine for people who dig insolvency. History will, of course, be the final judge. But I see no reason why increasing our debt couldn't be as popular as other programs. Like prohibition.

Rarely has so much combined effort gone into creating something so underwhelming. The cuts are nice but not nearly enough. And as far as I can tell, the bill's only source of new revenue is having people look under seat cushions for spare change. Postal workers in Washington will have to work overtime to handle the crush of fan mail that's surely coming for the president and Congress.

To me, what's even more impressive than the outcome is how they carried themselves. When faced with certain economic doom, President Obama did what any intelligent public servant would have done. He played golf. Is there a better way of projecting urgency than by spending time on a putting green? That scene reminded me of when Franklin Roosevelt tried playing darts to fix the Great Depression.

Republicans were equally inspiring. This was a crisis that demanded honest compromise. And John Boehner rose to the occasion. He blamed others. I was never good at history but this custom probably began when Abraham Lincoln called daily press conferences to mock the South during The Civil War. After all, blaming others is the fastest way to make people like you.

Right now, you're probably asking yourself, "How can I achieve this level of popularity in my own life?" Well, the good news is that you can. All you have to do is imitate them. When 19 percent of Americans approve of the way you're doing your job, things like widespread acclaim just come with the

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package. So last week I tried out a few of their tricks. In each situation, I asked myself, "What would a politician do?"

I began the week paying my rent. Usually I just write a check. But then I recalled what Speaker Boehner said recently: "At the end of the day, we have a spending problem." He makes a great point. So I handed them a piece of paper that said simply, "I.O.U." They were thrilled at my new fiscal prudence.

Using the money I saved by not paying my rent, I then went car shopping. In this economy, it's important to be frugal. So I settled for a Ferrari. I was worried they wouldn't approve me for a loan. But I remembered Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's stern warning: "If we don't raise the debt ceiling, we'll face an economic disaster." I told the dealer if he didn't raise my credit

score, he would face a financial tsunami. Or some such babble. He laughed and then gave me the keys.

I make fun of these hucksters because it distracts me from facing the truth. The truth is we're broke. And we just gave ourselves permission to spend vast sums of money we don't have. Right now, America reminds me of a desperate gambler in Las Vegas. You've seen him before. He tells himself he'll only spend \$100, no matter what happens. And then an hour later he's at the ATM taking out an extra \$200 because he just knows that this slot machine will hit it big "really soon."

We deserve better. Maybe the legislators just needed more time to craft a better bill. But then it hits me. This confederacy of dunces in Washington doesn't need more time. They need a time-out.

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