Title
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Publication Date
2013-02-26

Peer reviewed
Why Ultra-Conservatives Like the Sequester

by George Lakoff

Paul Krugman, Joe Stiglitz, Robert Reich and other major economists have pointed out that the deficit is not an urgent economic problem and that, to the contrary, the economy would be helped by an increase in public investment and harmed by drastic cuts. The Sequester would hurt the economy, millions of people, and the country as a whole.

President Obama has detailed the vast range of harms that the sequester would bring. They are well-known. And they are not necessary. The president sees the sequester, if it happens, as an enormous self-inflicted wound, inflicted on America by a Republican-dominated House elected by Americans.

But pointing out Republican-caused harms to millions of people -- many of them Republicans -- does not sway the ultra-right. Why? Democratic pundits say that Republicans want to hurt the president, to show government doesn't work by making it not work, and to protect "special interests" from higher taxes. All true. But there is an additional and deeper reason. Ultra-conservatives believe that the sequester is moral, that it is the right thing to do.

Progressives tend to believe that democracy is based on citizens caring for their fellow citizens through what the government provides for all citizens -- public infrastructure, public safety, public education, public health, publicly-sponsored research, public forms of recreation and culture, publicly-guaranteed safety nets for those who need them, and so on. In short, progressives believe that the private depends on the public, that without those public provisions Americans cannot be free to live reasonable lives and to thrive in private business. They believe that those who make more from public provisions should pay more to maintain them.

Ultra-conservatives don't believe this. They believe that Democracy gives them the liberty to seek their own self-interests by exercising personal responsibility, without having responsibility for anyone else or anyone else having responsibility for them. They take this as a matter of morality. They see the social responsibility to provide for the common good as an immoral imposition on their liberty.

Their moral sense requires that they do all they can to make the government fail in providing for the common good. Their idea of liberty is maximal personal
responsibility, which they see as maximal privatization -- and profitization -- of all that we do for each other together, jointly as a unified nation.

They also believe that if people are hurt by government failure, it is their own fault for being "on the take" instead of providing for themselves. People who depend on public provisions should suffer. They should have rely on themselves alone -- learn personal responsibility, just as Romney said in his 47 percent speech. In the long run, they believe, the country will be better off if everyone has to depend on personal responsibility alone.

Moreover, ultra-conservatives do not see all the ways in which they, and other ultra-conservatives, rely all day every day on what other Americans have supplied for them. They actually believe that they built it all by themselves.

So for them the sequester is not a "self-inflicted wound." It is justice. The sequester is not merely about protecting "special interests." It is about the good people who pursued their self-interest successfully, got rich, and have acted "morally" in avoiding taxes that pay for public provisions by the government.

They are not merely trying to harm their own constituents just to hurt the president politically. Yes, they think hurting the president politically is moral, and they believe that any constituents they are hurting need to become more personally responsible. They see the sequester as serving that purpose.

In short, the sequester is not just about money and political power for the Republicans in the House. It is mostly about what they see as the right direction for the country: maximal elimination of the public sphere.

In short, they have an ideology that partially, but only partially, fits what half of our population believes. Overall, it actually fits what about 20 to 30 percent of the population totally believes. Both total progressives and partial progressives don’t want to see millions of folks hurt and the economy hurt as well. But thanks to Republican gerrymandering at the state level, progressives and partial progressives do not control Congress.

This is the real picture and few people in public life dare to tell it. It is more convenient, and less scary, to think that all that is involved is money and politics as usual. That’s what current Democratic messaging says. Democratic messaging hasn’t gotten to the heart of the problem: the real moral divide in America. Democratic messaging, in blaming Republicans in Congress for the harm to come, just offends Republicans and fails to speak to moral divide at the heart of our public life.

Would addressing it help? I think so, if it is done with the appropriate sensitivity.