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Gov't Shutdown? Bring It On

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Distinctly Catholic

Some Republicans in Congress have come up with a great idea: Shut down the government to dramatize their commitment to overturning Obamacare. (Why didn't I think of that!) This maneuver would, as they see it, demonstrate their conservative bona fides even if it failed and, if it worked, so much the better.

Charles Krauthammer, who is not exactly a friend of President Obama, said of the government shutdown strategy: "Those who fancy themselves tea party patriots fighting a sold-out cocktail-swilling establishment are demanding yet another cliff dive as a show of principle and manliness." Krauthammer rightly notes that the White House would enjoy nothing more than a GOP-inspired government shutdown in which the Republicans would be blamed now as they were in 1995 when then-Speaker Newt Gingrich thought a shutdown a sound strategy.

Veteran Republican members are cautioning the zelanti in their midst not to do it. They remember the fallout from the 1995 mess. But, the tea party patriots do not wish to be taught. They are petulant children who think they know all the answers already and have nothing to learn from those with more experience, even when that experience is precisely on point. (This phenomenon is not confined to conservative members of Congress. I can think of some leftie pols, and others, who display this ugly character trait.) Petulance is precociousness gone bad and the up-and-comers in the GOP want to make their stand despite the warnings from their own fellow Republicans.

Why will Republicans get blamed? Sen. Ted Cruz said the other night on Fox News that he intends to like the defunding of Obamacare to a government funding measure that funds everything else, so that it is the president who will get blamed. Cruz seems to forget that if Americans were that upset about Obamacare, they had a chance to do something about it last year. Gov. Mitt Romney promised to repeal Obamacare,

President Obama promised to implement it. We know who won.

The Republicans, though, get blamed for a government shutdown even if it is the Democrats who precipitate it. Why is that? Because Democrats are known to be the party of big government and Republicans the party of small government. A government shutdown, no matter the circumstances of how it happens, immediately reminds Americans of the many things that government does that they like a lot. We like knowing that Medicare, and not we, will pay for dad's upcoming surgery. We like it when mom gets her Social Security check. We like the fact that there are brave men and women who defend this country's security, and we want to see them paid on-time. If we volunteer at our parish food pantry, we know that even our best efforts can only be supplementary to SNAP, so if the SNAP cards don't work, the parish food pantry will be stretched beyond capacity. And on and on. A government shutdown is a nationwide lesson in the good that government does and, just so, no matter who is technically responsible, a shutdown works for the long-term advantage of the Democrats.

It baffles me that Sen. Cruz can't see this. He is not a stupid man. I suspect this has to do with his long-term ambition to be the first tea party nominee of the GOP. And, the truth be told, this strategy probably does help him, even if it damages the party: He does not stand for re-election until 2018, and by then the zelanti will have taken over the party and crashed it or he will still be able to present himself as the true believer-deliverer who can save the party from its establishment wing.

I fear something deeper, however, is going on. There is a strain of anti-government fever, which first emerged in the fight over Obamacare, and it has not gone away. Here is the challenge for the Democrats and the president: They must implement Obamacare as efficiently and effectively as possible. Today, still, any person on any side of the debate, can marshal some numbers to praise or condemn it. If you watch Fox, your premiums are going through the roof. If you watch MSNBC, your premiums are coming down. In a year's time, people will not need to rely on the media to know which scenario has come to pass. The effective, efficient, and probably flexible implementation of Obamacare is the most salient thing the pro-government party could do. If that does not take some of the fever out of the tea party patriots, nothing will.

?Nothing will.? There is that possibility too. Every generation has its share of flat-earthers. It is the curse of today's GOP that a majority of their primary electorate probably fits that bill. Watching the grownups in the GOP caucus get frustrated with those whose passions they have been stoking these past few years is simple justice. The zelanti need to have their Goldwater, their McGovern, moment I suspect. And that means in a few years we will all get used to the phrase, ?Madame President.?

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