

DC's Crisis: Insanity or Evil?

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 16, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

The clock ticks closer to a government default. The government remains shutdown. Is this outcome the result of insanity or evil? The Holy Father recently distinguished between the two, reminding Christians that in the Gospels, Jesus is not shy about discussing the "evil one." There is something very modern, and very shallow, about our unwillingness to treat evil as real. A quick look at the historical record suggests that mental illness is not really the cause of all the tragedies that have afflicted the human race.

The shutdown-debt ceiling crisis is the result of a bit of both insanity and evil. Last night on "Crossfire," Cong. Steve King of Iowa explained why the worry about breaking through the debt ceiling was nonsensical, that the Treasury Department could, with some giggling of accounts, pay the nation's bills, even though the Secretary of the Treasury has no legal authority to giggle accounts. Mr. King also failed to note that, already, one of the nation's credit rating agencies had placed government bonds in the warning zone for a default. At a minimum, a default will result in higher interest rates, first for the government, thereby adding to the debt, but for the rest of us too. If you have an adjustable rate mortgage, you should pray that Cong. King is not listened to.

Cong. Peter King "no relation" said of the GOP's strategy in this morning's Washington Post: "We didn't get anything. This has been a total waste of time. I think they think they've won somehow. Whatever echo chamber they live in, they're only hearing good things." My disagreements with Cong. Peter King are many, but his has been a voice of sanity in the past couple of weeks.

There is, however, evil lurking underneath the insanity, and feeding it. This past weekend, at an anti-Obama rally attended by Sen. Ted Cruz and for Gov. Sarah Palin, one of the speakers said that the President needed to "put down his Koran," and said the President worshipped Allah. There is nothing wrong with worshipping Allah if one is a Muslim, but of course, the President is not a Muslim. The suggestion that he is, and the idea that being Muslim is somehow disqualifying for public office, was a stark reminder that the Tea Party is little more than the Religious Right when it is talking about taxes. Another one of the protesters stood outside the White House brandishing the Confederate battle flag. Call me silly, but I think standing outside the house of a black man waving the Confederate battle flag is evil.

There is no question where the blame for the shutdown and the debt ceiling crisis lies. This mess was engineered by Republican Tea Partiers and abetted by the GOP leadership in the House. I do not envy Speaker John Boehner his job, but the difficulty in his tasks cannot mask the fact that the past two weeks have been a Profile in Cowardice.

That said, neither party has covered themselves in glory. The Republicans continue to complain that the recovery from the recession in 2008 is exceedingly anemic compared to prior recoveries, failing to note that the anemic recovery might be the result of the fact that the recession in 2008 was worse, systemically worse, than

prior recessions. They complain about the historic deficits run up on Obama's watch, failing to note that those deficits were the result of efforts to beat back the recession that occurred on their watch. Conversely, I get sick to my stomach when any Democrat chirpily proclaims that the deficit is falling at an historic rate. Well, yes it is, but that is because it is falling from an historic high. When a person gets through emergency surgery, their condition may have improved fifty percent, but they are still in ICU. Lies, damned lies, and statistics.

The other day, Larry Summers [had an interesting op-ed](#) [1] in which he noted that, all things being equal, the current deficit projections are not exceedingly onerous, provided the nation's growth rate gets back to normal. "While the CBO projects that under current law the debt-to-GDP ratio will rise over the longer term," Summers wrote, "the rise is not large relative to the scale of the U.S. economy. It would be offset by an increase of revenue or decrease in spending of 0.8 percent of GDP for the next 25 years and 1.7 percent of GDP for the next 75 years." Some of us worry, and worry deeply, that the growth-model for economic health is itself suspect, but no one in either party is seriously challenging that model. On the terms of the current political debate in Washington, Summers is right: The parties should not be fighting about the debt but focusing on a pro-growth strategy, a focus to which both parties bring important contributions.

The problem for the Republicans is that they began the shutdown talking not about the need to restrain spending but about the need to defund Obamacare. That has, mercifully, been taken off the table and the GOP has returned to the issue of government spending. But, having changed horses mid-argument, the GOP's case, which is a popular case, that the government spends too much money, that argument has no traction. And, yesterday, the Heritage Action Fund announced that it was opposing Speaker Boehner's last ditch effort to pass a bill to end the crisis because "you guessed it" it did not do enough to restrain Obamacare. We are back to the insanity.

We are also back to the evil. Not the evil of racism or anti-Muslim bigotry. But to the evil of pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. To listen to Sen. Cruz or to Cong. Steve King is to reacquaint oneself with the demagoguery we associate with Fr. Coughlin and Sen. Joseph McCarthy. It is to behold someone who is convinced that he, and he alone, possesses all the truth. It is to encounter someone incapable of governance because he has demonized his opponents not disagreed with them. Fortunately, in human history and in the Good Book, we are told that pride goeth before the fall. Let's hope the fall happens sometime today. Otherwise, Cruz and King et al. will be taking all of us over the cliff with them.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/lawrence-summers-in-shutdown-debate-focus-on-growth-not-deficit/2013/10/13/c944c20c-3428-11e3-be86-6aeaa439845b_story.html