



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on January 11, 2011

A Republican Showdown?

They say that, in politics, “overnight is a lifetime.” In other words, the journey from triumphant hero to discredited scapegoat can be very brief.

In the wake of the Republicans’ triumphs in last November’s elections, great hopes are being held out that Republican control of the House of Representatives can slam the brakes on Barack Obama’s march toward a completely government-controlled economy and ruinous deficit spending.

The first big step toward that goal could be forcing the Obama administration to cut back on spending, as the price of raising the national debt ceiling, which will be necessary early on in this new Congress, if the federal government is not going to be forced to shut down for lack of money.



Much of the runaway spending in Washington has been a spending of money that the government doesn’t have in the till, by borrowing money through the sale of government bonds — in other words, running up a record high national debt.

Because there is a legal limit on how much national debt the government can create, the spending has to be cut back or the debt ceiling increased by Congress. Otherwise, the government is going to have to shut down many of its operations for lack of money.

Some people see this as a golden opportunity for the new Republican majority to gain concessions from the Obama administration, as the price for going along with an increase in the national debt. It sounds logical. But logic is not always the dominant factor in politics.

The last time the government shut down, back during the Clinton administration, the Republicans were riding high as a result of their capture of the House of Representatives — where all spending bills must originate — for the first time in decades.

Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich seemed to hold all the high cards. But the government shutdown ruined Republicans politically.

Congress had increased the amount of money appropriated for the government to spend, though not by as much as President Clinton wanted. So it was Clinton who shut down the government, though it was the Republicans who got blamed.

Sometimes it doesn’t matter who holds the high cards, if the other side plays their cards better.

Today, the Republicans don’t hold as many high cards as they did back during the Clinton administration. How did they lose then — and what are their chances of losing now, if they try to force serious concessions from the administration, and Obama calls their bluff by daring them to shut down



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the government?

Often, in politics, it doesn't matter what the facts are. What matters is how well you make your case to the voting public.

Back in 1995, Bill Clinton and the Congressional Democrats, with the aid of the media, pounded away on the theme that the Republicans had "cut" government programs, even where the Republicans had appropriated more money than these programs had ever had before.

What Republicans had cut was the amount that Clinton had asked for. You might think that this was a fairly obvious difference and that this could be explained to the public. But the Republicans failed to do so effectively.

It was painful to watch various Republican spokesmen come on television and talk about discrepancies between Congressional Budget Office statistics and statistics from the Office of Management and Budget. This might have been fascinating stuff in a seminar on accounting, but it was like Greek to many TV viewers.

If the Republicans cannot be bothered to put in the time and the hard work required to develop an effective articulation of their case, then they deserve to lose. But the country does not deserve to have disastrous policies continue.

While the case for having the government play Santa Claus is easier to make, the opposite case is by no means impossible to make. Radio talk show hosts from Rush Limbaugh to Sean Hannity and many others make that case every day, in plain language that anyone can understand.

If Republicans still do not appreciate the enormous importance of articulation, then forcing a shutdown of the government can be another political disaster for them. So can caving in to Obama.

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