

## After months of budget fights, one victor emerges: Rhetoric

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CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



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Last week when Democrats and Republicans in Congress were outpress-conferencing each other on who was more fiscally competent and who cared more about the American people and our country's future, I got angry several times. I yelled at the TV, rolled my eyes at the computer, debated with my partner, and with some inanimate objects too (the inanimate objects are easier sometimes).

Here's what I know. This was not a fight about balancing the budget. If it were, there would have been serious negotiations about changing the tax code, letting some tax cuts expire, and reducing spending in a variety of Federal agencies, including a real look at defense and major reform of entitlement programs. It was also not about Democrats protecting the more vulnerable. The actions that allowed the Bush tax cuts to continue and the administration's budget, which came out in February, already indicated that poor and sick people were not a priority (reductions in Community Development Block Grant, Community Health Centers, etc.).

No, as I see it, this was not a fight for our long-term future; this was a fight for the next election. This was and will continue to be a fight about which party has the best rhetoric to win the support of the American people in 2012. I'm all for balancing the budget and will continue to support funding for agencies and programs I believe in.

In the meantime, the Democrats in office and the Democratic Party are losing the rhetorical battle, and possibly 2012. Here are some reasons why:

"Just as families across the nation do every day, we had to make tough choices and begin to live within our means, but we also had clear lines that protected the investments we need to win the future." – White House blog, April 9.

Your household might be different, but I tend not to protect investments to "win" the future. Also, my domestic expenditures greatly outweigh my foreign ones. Not that I wouldn't like to go abroad more. It's just a matter of practicality. Also, I don't get to raise my debt ceiling. It's a bad metaphor, it makes fun of my intelligence, and it needs to stop.

"Democratic Sen. Charles Schumer said the cuts are 'across the board. Everybody gives some pain.'" – CBS Face the Nation, April 4.

I watched the clip just to make sure this wasn't made up. It's not, and it's reposted on CBS and other websites. I'll give points to the Senator for being honest, though. Congress and the White House are passing on the pain, to be sure.

"We cannot play chicken with the economy in this way. It's just too darn risky. It's not appropriate." – White House Press Secretary, Jay Carney, on raising the debt ceiling vote (the next big budget/policy fight) – Huffington Post April 11 (and reported on in different fashions in many other places).

When I think of playing chicken, I think of when I played with other kids in a pool – people on other people's shoulders, trying to knock each other off into the water. And, you know what? It WAS darned risky. Someone could get a bruise, or water up their nose. I'm not sure if it was ever

inappropriate. Though I'm sure there are college versions that might be.

Finally, this gem.

"There are going to be plenty of times when you won't be able to reach common ground and you have to be in pugilistic mode, but you can't view any kind of agreement with the other side as weakness." – David Plouffe (Obama Senior Advisor, quoted in NY times), reposted on Huffington Post April 11.

This one is worth breaking down a little for its numerous offenses against rhetoric. He loses on a) wonkiness (I had to read this sentence three times before I understood it), b) using words that reduce impact ("pugilistic mode" – in addition to sounding much weaker than "a fight" it sounds silly and academic), and c) paternalism (by implying I shouldn't view things a certain way, that I shouldn't disagree with what happened or consider it weak).

Even if it's blatantly false, the Republicans know how to use rhetoric to move their party and frustrate the opposing party. The Democrats spend so much time fighting back, that we cannot develop our own story, our own rhetoric – not just to win an election, but to do right in other situations, like budget fights.

Can we stop being individuals who are constantly analyzing what's wrong and criticizing each other as much as the other party and actually be organized enough to win? Can the Democratic Party tell stories that translate the rhetoric to move the American people? I'm not sure, but I'm not sure we can make any real progress with the approach we currently have either.

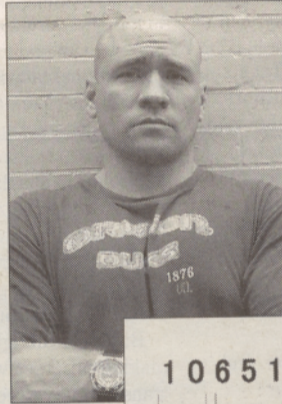
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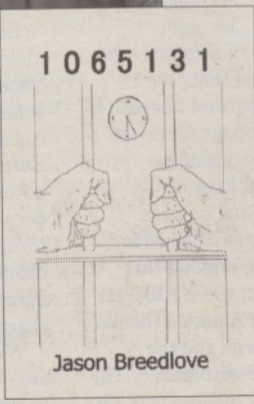
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I'd like to thank all the people who attended the Powell's Smallpresspalooza. I sold ten copies of the book I read from (Jason Breedlove 1065131) as well as several copies of a fictional short story I've written called "The Junkie Manifesto." I also gave away over 30 copies of my daily desktop calendar.



Reading Frenzy and Powell's carry both of my books as well as my short story. My latest book and short story are also on Kindle. My book of short stories should be out by June 2011.

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