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Shutdown damages are real costs

Remember when Republicans were the party of business?

One of Pope Francis' most vivid observations to the joint session of Congress last week was the danger of viewing choices in terms of black and white.

The Pope advised them to "guard against the simplistic reductionism which sees only good or evil."

This point was likely lost on a number of the lawmakers who filled the House chamber to hear the Pope. Their politics these days are all about black-and-white choices. Black and white is what raises big money.

It didn't used to be that way. Not so long ago, senators and congressmen realized that compromise was essential to progress.

House Speaker John Boehner's surprising resignation was in large part about the new way of doing business in the House. A group of recently arrived tea party Republicans stand in the way of the speaker's bringing bills to the House floor; for instance, the immigration reform bill passed by the Senate in 2013.

That insurgent group, which calls itself "conservative" is itching to shut down the federal government over the issue of funding Planned Parenthood.

In their ignorance, these law-

makers don't realize the damage to the economy that a government shutdown inflicts. John Carney in last Friday's *Wall Street Journal* wrote explicitly about those costs. In a nutshell, Wall Street was buoyed by Speaker Boehner's announced resignation, because it signaled there would be no shutdown this year.

Wrote Carney: "Before Mr. Boehner's announcement, Goldman Sachs analysts estimated a 50% chance of a shutdown. While the analysts said they expected a muted market reaction, they estimated each week of a shutdown would subtract two-tenths of a percentage point from real gross domestic product growth in the fourth quarter."

The projections of a shutdown damage are not hypothetical. Reported Carney: "The 2013 government shutdown cut between two-tenths and six-tenths of a percentage point from real GDP in that year's fourth quarter, according to government and private estimates."

Remember when Republicans were the party of business?

Sen. Wyden is a bipartisan champion

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., is unusual in the modern American Congress in attaching a high value to the principle of bipartisanship — of putting "problem solving and the needs of the country ahead of your political party, caucus or any other group or pledge that you have signed," as he said in 2012.

Wyden again addressed the issue of working together this week as the Senate passed a temporary spending bill to avoid a looming government shutdown.

Noting Wednesday that this includes \$700 million in desperately needed wildfire funding, Wyden said, "This short-term fix is an unfortunate necessity as once again, Congress has decided to govern by crisis. ... I intend to keep pushing for a bipartisan, long-term fix to provide funding for prevention funds as well as wildfire suppression."

This is precisely the kind of "public good" that national government is best positioned to provide — stepping up to help in an emergency and working to avoid future disasters. This is particularly appropriate in the case of wildfires and forest maintenance, which often heavily impact publicly owned lands.

Unfortunately, we live in a lamentable time in American politics when a powerful block of blockheads in Congress acts

on the unprincipled belief that the nation is best off when government is crippled.

The Lugar Center at Georgetown University honors former Republican U.S. Sen. Richard Lugar's legacy of working with colleagues on behalf of the national good. It publishes a Bipartisan Index that rates current members.

Wyden comes out among the most bipartisan senators, 36th out of 100. Elsewhere in the Northwest, senators who rate comparatively well for bipartisanship include Sens. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., 43rd and Jon Tester, D-Mont., 23rd.

Highly partisan U.S. senators from our region include Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., at 93rd, along with Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, 95th, John Barrasso, R-Wyo., 86th, and Patty Murray, D-Wash., 83rd.

In the U.S. House from our area, Democratic U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici is in the middle of the pack — 176th out of the 422 House members, while Rep. Jaime Herrera Beutler, R-Wash., is 150th.

Clearly, the most partisan political party members who actively participate in primary elections and caucuses are likely to feel less happy about efforts to cooperate with "the other side." But a majority of Americans believe party affiliations shouldn't get in the way of governing.

The problematic prison problem

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

Pretty much everybody from Barack Obama to Carly Fiorina seems to agree that far too many Americans are stuck behind bars.

And pretty much everybody seems to have the same explanation for how this destructive era of mass incarceration came about.

First, the war on drugs got out of control, meaning that many non-violent people wound up in prison. Second, mandatory-minimum sentencing laws led to a throw-away-the-key culture, with long, cruel and pointlessly destructive prison terms.

It's true that mass incarceration is a horrific problem.

Back in the 1970s the increase in incarceration did help reduce the crime rate, maybe accounting for a third of the drop. But today's incarceration levels do little to deter crime while they do much to rip up families, increase racial disparities and destroy lives.

The popular explanation for how we got here, however, seems to be largely wrong, and most of the policy responses flowing from it may therefore be inappropriate.

The drug war is not even close to being the primary driver behind the sharp rise in incarceration. About 90 percent of America's prisoners are held in state institutions. Only 17 percent of these inmates are in for a drug-related offense, or less than 1 in 5.

Moreover, the share of people imprisoned for drug offenses is dropping sharply, down by 22 percent between 2006 and 2011. Writing in *Slate*, Leon Neyfakh emphasized that if you released every drug offender from state prison today, you'd

reduce the population only to 1.2 million from 1.5 million.

The war on drugs does not explain the rocketing rates of incarceration, and ending that war, wise or not, will not solve this problem.

The mandatory-minimum theory is also problematic. Experts differ on this, but some of the most sophisticated work with the best data sets has been done by John Pfaff of Fordham Law School. When I spoke with Pfaff on Monday I found him to be wonderfully objective, nonideological and data-driven.

His research suggests that while it's true that lawmakers passed a lot of measures calling for long prison sentences, if you look at how much time inmates actually served, not much has changed over the past few decades. Roughly half of all prisoners have prison terms in the range of

two to three years, and only 10 percent serve more than seven years. The laws look punitive, but the time served hasn't increased, and so harsh laws are not the main driver behind mass incarceration, either.

So what does explain it? Pfaff's theory is that it's the prosecutors. District attorneys and their

assistants have gotten a lot more aggressive in bringing felony charges. Twenty years ago they brought felony charges against about 1 in 3 arrestees. Now it's something like 2 in 3. That produces a lot more plea bargains and a lot more prison terms.

I asked Pfaff why prosecutors are more aggressive. He's heard theories. Maybe they are more political and they want to show toughness to raise their profile to impress voters if they run for future office. Maybe the police are bringing stronger cases. Additionally, prosecutors are



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usually paid by the county but prisons by the state, so prosecutors tend not to have to worry about the financial costs of what they do.

Pfaff says there's little evidence so far to prove any of these theories, since the prosecutorial world is largely a black box. He also points out that we have a radically

decentralized array of prosecutors, with some elected and some appointed. Changing their behavior cannot be done with one quick fix.

Some politicians and activists suggest that solving this problem will be easy — just release the pot smokers and the low-level dealers. In reality, reducing mass incarceration means releasing a lot of once-violent offenders. That may be the right thing to do in individual cases, but it's a knotty problem.

Two final points. Everybody is railing against the political establishment and experts and experienced politicians. But social problems are invariably more complex than they look. The obvious explanation for most problems is often wrong. It takes experience and craftsmanship to design policies that grapple with the true complexity of reality.

Finally, recategorizing a problem doesn't solve it. In the 1970s, we let a lot of people out of mental institutions. Over the next decades we put a lot of people into prisons. But the share of people kept out of circulation has been strangely continuous. In the real world, crime, lack of education, mental health issues, family breakdown and economic hopelessness are all intertwined.

Changing prosecutor behavior might be a start. Lifting the spirits of inmates, as described in the outstanding Atlantic online video "Angola for Life," can also help. But the fundamental situation won't be altered without a comprehensive surge, unless we flood the zone with economic, familial, psychological and social repair.

The obvious explanation for most problems is often wrong.

Jeb Bush, 'free stuff' and black folks

By CHARLES M. BLOW
New York Times News Service

At a campaign event in South Carolina last week, Republican presidential candidate Jeb Bush was asked how he planned to include black people in his campaign and get them to vote for him.

Bush responded, "Our message is one of hope and aspiration."

But he didn't stop there. He continued: "It isn't one of division and get in line and we'll take care of you with free stuff. Our message is one that is uplifting — that says you can achieve earned success."

There it is! If you let people talk long enough, the true self will always be revealed. Not only is there a supreme irony in this racial condescension that casts black people, whose free labor helped establish the prosperity of this country and who were systematically excluded from the full benefits of that prosperity for generations, as leeches only desirous of "free stuff," this line of reasoning also infantilizes black thought and consciousness and presents an I-know-best-what-ails-you paternalism about black progress.

It echoes the trope about lazy "welfare queens," although as a report last year from the Congressional Research Service makes clear: "Historically, nonwhite women had a higher labor force participation rate than did white women. This especially held true for married women."

Furthermore, although blacks are disproportionately the recipients of programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, a 2013 report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that most households with at least one working-age, nondisabled adult receiving the benefit work, and of those with families, "almost 90 per-

cent work in the prior or subsequent year."

The problem isn't refusal to work, but inability to find work that is stable and pays a living wage, thereby pushing them out of need and eligibility.

Bush's comment also hints at the role of black men without acknowledging the disastrous toll racially skewed patterns of mass incarceration have taken on the fortunes of black families by disproportionately ensnaring black men.

All history and context are cast aside in support of a specious argument: That the black community is plagued by pathological dependence and a chronic, self-defeating posture of victimization.

And this is not some one-time slip of the tongue for Bush. In Bush's book written two decades ago, *Profiles in Character*, he wrote: "Since the 1960s, the politics of victimization has steadily intensified. Being a victim gives rise to certain entitlements, benefits, and preferences in society. The surest way to get something in today's society is to elevate one's status to that of the oppressed. Many of the modern victim movements — the gay rights movement, the feminist movement, the black empowerment movement — have attempted to get people to view themselves as part of

a smaller group deserving of something from society. It is a major deviation from the society envisioned by Martin Luther King, who would have had people judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin — or sexual preference or gender or ethnicity."

Not only does this completely ignore the historical and structural effect of America's endemic anti-black racism, it also misinterprets King's own understanding of this phenomenon.



Charles Blow

As King told an audience at Stanford University in 1967, he understood that the dismantling of legal segregation was in a way, the easy part. It was the structural racism, not written in law but on in the minds of men, that was harder to change.

He blasted "large segments of white society" for being "more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, equality, and humanity." He slammed what he calls the "white backlash" for being the cause of black discontent and shouts for Black Power, rather than the result of it, calling it "merely a new name for an old phenomenon." And he declared that true integration "is not merely a romantic or aesthetic something where you merely add color to a still predominantly white power structure."

You see, King wasn't naively oblivious to structural racism and how it cloistered power and inhibited mobility and equality; he was acutely aware of it and adamantly opposed to it. It wasn't about victimization, but honest appraisal. Most black people don't want America's prescriptions, pitiabilities or pity, and never have.

James Baldwin told *The Paris Review* three decades ago that he refused to think of himself as a victim, and that "perhaps the turning point in one's life is realizing that to be treated like a victim is not necessarily to become one." As Baldwin explained it, "if I took the role of a victim then I was simply reassuring the defenders of the status quo; as long as I was a victim they could pity me and add a few more pennies to my home-relief check."

Pity doesn't dismantle privilege, but supports it. Pity requires a perch. It rolls down. Pity reinforces imbalances of power. It can be violence operating as benevolence.

Black folk don't want "free stuff" as much as the fulfillment of the promise of freedom: true equality of access, opportunity and justice. Bush — and America — would do well to consider that.

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