

OPINION

No Extortion for Debt Ceiling Vote

Ideology should not trump working class

BY MARC H. MORIAL



Rarely have the divisions in American politics been more clear - or more onerous. In three weeks, on Aug. 2, if Congress refuses to raise the nation's \$14.3 trillion debt ceiling, the United States economy could be thrown into a fiscal tailspin that would eviscerate America's credit rating, lead to sky-high interest rates, rip a giant hole in the social safety net, jeopardize the well-being and savings of millions of working and middle class citizens and result in the loss of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Majority leaders in the House and minority leaders in the Senate have taken the unprecedented step of linking a raise in the debt ceiling to the debate about deficit reduction and spending cuts. In effect, they are attempting to extort big cuts in programs benefiting working and middle class citizens while protecting exorbitant tax breaks for oil companies, corporate jet owners and hedge fund managers.

They say this is the only way they will agree to increase the debt limit. If they get their way, fiscal experts from Nobel Prize winning economist, Paul

Krugman to Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner to Federal Reserve Chairman, Ben Bernanke warn severe disruptions will occur.

Beginning Aug. 2, Social Security checks may be halted. Medicare, Medicaid and unemployment benefits may stop. Troops in Iraq and Afghanistan may not get paid. And Hundreds of thousands of government workers may be laid off. This is no way to run the most trustworthy and powerful government in the world. And it is no way to honor the hard work and sacrifices of its people.

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down, the debt ceiling has routinely been raised almost 100 times since its establishment in 1917. Former President George W. Bush raised it seven times without objection while racking up trillions of dollars of new debt for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and big tax breaks for the wealthiest Americans.

The Obama administration is not oblivious to the need for spending cuts. For months, Vice President Joe Biden has led bipartisan negotiations aimed at

agreeing on a sensible deficit reduction plan. Progress has been made. But recently several members of the so-called "Gang of Six," walked out of the negotiations because of ideological resistance to balancing spending cuts for the middle class with ending some tax breaks for the wealthy.

As they defend the rights of working-class Americans, I would urge them also to consider the recommendations included in the National Urban League's 12-Point Jobs Plan, "Putting Urban American Back To Work." The creation of Urban Jobs Academies to train the critically unemployed, or Green Empowerment Zones to locate manufacturing jobs in urban areas, could ease the transition to spending cuts.

So far, the President and sensible members of Congress have stood firm in their refusal to give in to ideological extortion.

As the President said in a recent press conference, "Any agreement to reduce our deficit is going to require tough decisions and balanced solutions. And before we ask our seniors to pay more for health care, before we cut our children's education, before we sacrifice our commitment to the research and innovation that will help create more jobs in the economy, I think it's only fair to ask an oil company or a corporate jet owner that has done so well to give up a tax break that no other business enjoys."

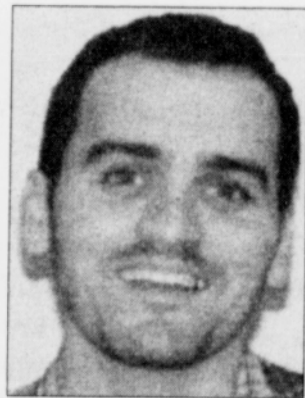
We agree. Raise the debt ceiling, but not on the backs of working and middle class Americans.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Tell the People about the People's Budget

Progressive solutions have public support

BY PETER HART



If you listen to the pundits and TV commentators, the federal budget problem has a simple solution: cuts, cuts, and more cuts. They cheer politicians for making "tough choices," which usually entails taking money away from schools, stiffing public workers, and telling the poor and the elderly they need to make do with even less.

Tough choices, indeed — but for whom?

The funny thing is regular people aren't buying the idea that this is the only way to balance the country's books. Maybe there's something about a millionaire TV host talking about "shared sacrifice" that rubs Bob and Betty Sixpack the wrong way. Or maybe the American people just feel like there's got to be another way — one that doesn't require scrapping Medicare or slashing Social Security.

If you look at the polls, the public's message is clear: protect Medicare and Social Security, spend less on the military, and raise taxes on the wealthy. And while

we're at it, let's tax the Wall Street speculators who wrecked our economy.

But if you look at the newspapers or your TV screen, those ideas are rarely, if ever, part of the budget debate. Is there no one in Washington who is sticking up for what the majority of the public wants?

But wait. The Congressional Progressive Caucus, which includes 74 House Democrats and Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), released an alternative budget blueprint back in April. This "People's Budget" would achieve a better balance by taxing the wealthy, reining in runaway military spending, and protecting the New Deal social safety net — just what people tell pollsters that they want.

There's a good chance you've never heard about this part of the budget debate, though there's been a mountain of media coverage of the budget mess — thousands of articles and television programs.

If you've paid attention to any of it, you're probably well acquainted with Rep. Paul Ryan. The Wisconsin Republican has "jet black hair and a touch of Eagle Scout to him," according to one magazine profile. The New York Times told readers about his "piercing blue eyes." It's not just his looks that impress the media. His budget plan, which pairs yet more big tax breaks for the rich with spending cuts for everyone else, is constantly touted as being "bold" and "serious."

And the People's Budget? Well, it's not even mentioned. There were no hard news stories about it in the big papers. Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank wrote about the press conference unveiling the People's Budget only to mock it — right down to poking fun at one lawmaker's tie.

Milbank spelled out some of the details of the People's Budget, but only because he thought the ideas were absurd on their face: "No cuts in Social Security benefits, government-negotiated Medicare drug prices, and increased income and Social Security taxes for the wealthy. Corporations and investors would be hit with a variety of new fees and taxes...The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would end."

Ending wars and making the wealthy pay their fair share? That probably doesn't sound so crazy to most people. But that the Post considers Milbank to be one of its "left-leaning" columnists is completely nuts.

The budget debate is locked up in a partisan stalemate. That makes it as good a time as any to tell the people about the People's Budget. Most newspapers and TV networks aren't doing that. And when you look at who stands to gain — and who stands to lose — it's no mystery why corporate-owned media are keeping us in the dark.

Peter Hart is the activism director for the group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.