

The Moral Case for Preserving the Safety Net

By Rev. Jennifer Butler and Gordon Whitman

As cracks form among CEOs and Republican Members of Congress over their hardline anti-tax position in the fiscal showdown, religious leaders from across the ideological spectrum have been united in supporting new revenue over additional spending cuts. And they're speaking for their people. A strong majority of religious Americans favor letting the Bush tax cuts for the richest two percent of Americans expire. Even reliably conservative groups, such as white evangelical Protestants, are evenly divided on the issue.

The outcome of this debate has profound moral consequences. The government's capacity to invest in the common good and responsibly reduce the debt depends on raising more revenue. Letting tax cuts that only benefit the richest two percent expire isn't a magic bullet, but it's a necessary component of a balanced solution that doesn't harm poor families or slash Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid benefits for current or future beneficiaries.

Clergy have spoken clearly about our duty to protect low-income families in the fiscal showdown negotiations. Inspired by the clear mandates of Scripture, many of our nation's most prominent faith leaders have drawn a circle of protection around programs such as education funding, food stamps, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. This stance reflects not only religious

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In addition to programs aimed expressly at low-income Americans, we also have a responsibility to defend Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security. Social Security keeps 21 million Americans out of poverty every year. Medicaid protects not only low-income children and families, but also provides long-term care to mil-

financial crisis and an inefficient healthcare system as an auspice to weaken programs that ensure basic economic security and access to health care for millions of Americans is wrong. Arguing that we must slash these programs now to avoid destroying them later is a failure of leadership.

Faith leaders of the PICO National Network are telling our elected officials in no uncertain terms that protecting the poor, preserving the social contract and making the richest Americans pay their fair share are nonnegotiable priorities. This message is particularly important as corporate CEOs intensely lobby both parties to enact an agenda that cuts taxes for rich people and powerful corporations while undermining needed benefits for seniors and working families. Trickle-down economics and austerity benefit only the wealthy and powerful, and the rest of us pay the price.

Some conservative leaders argue that the religious obligation to care for the vulnerable — which is common to all faiths — applies to individuals but not government. But Scripture is clear that nations,

not just individuals, will be judged by how we treat the least among us. Furthermore, private religious groups alone cannot meet the needs of struggling families. Just four percent of food aid to hungry Americans comes from private sources. Government has to play a strong role. Those who would let people suffer rather than have government provide assistance put political ideology before the commandment to love our neighbors.

The fiscal showdown is a day of reckoning for the conservative movement's long-term "starve the beast" political strategy. For decades, they have cut taxes at every opportunity in order to run up deficits that would force the government to dramatically scale back the safety net. As right-wing lobbyist Grover Norquist put it, the objective is to shrink government to the size where he can "drag it into the bathroom and drown it in the bathtub." The moral imperative to ensure that this plan fails is clear, and the well-being of millions of Americans who are precious in the eyes of God depends on it.

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teachings about justice and compassion, but also popular opinion among people of faith. A post-election poll by Public Religion Research Institute showed that majorities of all major religious demographics (with the lone exception of white evangelical

Protestants) oppose cutting protections for the poor in order to reduce the deficit. In addition to programs aimed expressly at low-income Americans, we also have a responsibility to defend Medicaid, Medicare, and Social Security. Social Security keeps 21 million Americans out of poverty every year. Medicaid protects not only low-income children and families, but also provides long-term care to mil-

Down To The Fiscal Cliff Wire, With No Solution In Sight

By Brianna Keilar Dana Bash and Tom Cohen

Call it a bigger, bolder version of the deadline-driven congressional stalemates over taxes and spending that have come to define Washington dysfunction of the past two years.

The latest edition of political "blinksmanship" pits President Barack Obama and Democrats against Speaker John Boehner and Republicans on how to avoid the fiscal cliff — automatic tax increases for everyone and deep spending cuts including the military that will be triggered in the new year without an agreement.

While the focus now is on a possible agreement in coming days or weeks, anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist told CNN on Monday that the nation should gird for long-range battle.

"This is a long fight. It's four years of a fight. It's not one week of a fight," said Norquist, who has threatened to mount primary challenges against Republicans who violate a pledge they signed at his behest against ever voting for a tax increase.

With neither side showing any sign of blinking, however, the battlefield will probably shift to the Senate this week after GOP disarray in the House stymied any progress before Christmas.

Congress and the president are taking a holiday break, with plans to return to work Thursday to try to find a deal in the final five days of the year.

Economists warn that failing to avoid the fiscal cliff could spark recession, and stocks opened lower Monday amid no sign of the Washington impasse ending.

According to multiple Democratic and Republican sources, no weekend conversations occurred between the White House and Senate leaders from either party or their aides.

The main dispute continues to be over taxes, specifically the demand by Obama and Democrats to extend most of the tax cuts passed under President George W. Bush while allowing higher rates of the 1990s to return on top income brackets.

Republicans oppose any kind of increase in tax rates, and Boehner suffered the political indignity last week of offering a compromise that his colleagues refused to

support.

While both sides say they want to avoid the fiscal cliff, signs are emerging that a deal would come after the new year to blunt the harshest impacts. Under that scenario, legislators would vote to lower taxes from the higher rates that will go into effect in January when the Bush cuts expire, with the new top rates staying intact.

The sources described to CNN three possible options for moving ahead, all resting with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada.

One would be to amend a House measure passed in July that extends the Bush tax cuts for everyone. The changes would return to higher rates on top brackets, which Obama defines as family income up to \$250,000, and also could include the president's call to extend unemployment benefits and some of the fiscal cliff spending cuts.

A second possibility would involve a Senate measure that Democrats passed in July with no Republican support. It calls for the Obama plan of extending the current tax cuts on family income up to \$250,000.

However, the Senate version has a constitutional problem because by law, measures that raise revenue must originate in the House. Boehner said Friday that the Senate plan has a "blue slip" problem, which refers to an objection that it is unconstitutional and therefore remains lodged in the Senate.

While one Democratic source said the Senate version could get taken up in the House if Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell or Boehner don't raise a blue slip objection, Republican sources rejected that scenario.

Reid also could take a different revenue-raising bill from the House and rewrite it as a tax and spending measure to address fiscal cliff issues, the sources explained.

With Republicans holding filibuster power in the Democratic-majority Senate, at least seven GOP senators would have to join Democrats on such a plan before the end of the year. With McConnell up for re-election in 2014, he is considered unlikely to risk angering the party's conservative base by supporting a compromise or allowing one to pass on a simple majority

vote that would need no GOP backing, sources said.

In the new Senate that will convene in early January, the number of Republicans needed to pass a deal would be five because of Democratic gains in November, when Obama won re-election.

According to a Senate Republican leadership aide, Republicans reject Obama's \$250,000 threshold for tax cut extensions. Meanwhile, a Senate Democratic leadership aide lamented McConnell's apparent unwillingness to negotiate.

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