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David Brooks: Low road wrong path for Obama

President Barack Obama is an intelligent, judicious man who can see all sides of an issue. But every once in a while he tries to get politically cute, and he puts on his Keith Olbermann mask.

I suppose it's to his credit that he's most inept when he tries to take the low road. He resorts to hoary, brain-dead clichés. He wanders so far from his true nature that he makes Mitt Romney look like Mr. Authenticity.

That's pretty much what happened last week in Obama's speech before a group of newspaper editors. Obama's target in this speech was U.S. Rep. Paul Ryan's budget proposal.

It should be said at the outset that the Ryan budget has some disturbing weaknesses, which Democrats are right to identify. The Ryan budget would cut too deeply into discretionary spending. This could lead to self-destructive cuts in scientific research, health care for poor kids and programs that boost social mobility. Moreover, the Ryan tax ideas are too regressive. They make tax cuts for the rich explicit while they hide any painful loophole closings that might hurt Republican donors.

But these legitimate criticisms and Obama's modest but real deficit-reducing accomplishments got buried under an avalanche of distortion. The Republicans have been embarrassing themselves all primary season. It's as if Obama wanted to sink to their level in a single hour.

First, there was his tone. Obama cast himself as the fiscal moderate who embraced the bipartisan Simpson-Bowles approach. (Perhaps we were all asleep during the Simpson-Bowles-Obama consciousness tour.) Then, after unleashing every liberal cliché in the book, Obama exaggerated the differences between his budget and the Ryan budget.

There are, indeed, real differences, but in the short term they are not a chasm. In 2013, according to Veronique de Rugy of George Mason University, the Ryan budget would be about 5 percent smaller than the Obama budget, and it would grow a percent or two more slowly each year. After 10 years, government would be smaller under Ryan, but, as Daniel Mitchell of the Cato Institute complains, it would still take up a larger share of national output than when Bill Clinton left office.

Obama exaggerated these normal-sized differences into a Manichaeian chasm. Under Ryan, Obama charged, 10 million college students would get their financial aid cut by \$1,000, Alzheimer's research would be slashed, 200,000 children would lose their chance to enter Head Start.

Where did Obama get these specifics? He imagined them. He imposed some assumptions that are nowhere to be found in the Ryan budget. He compared Ryan's reduced spending increases with proposed growth, not current levels.

Then the president turned to Ryan's Medicare proposal. The Ryan plan, he charged, "will ultimately end Medicare as we know it."

In 2011, when Ryan first proposed a version of this budget, Politifact, the truth-checking outfit, honored this claim with its "Lie of the Year" award. Since then, the Ryan Medicare proposal has become more moderate and much better. Obama's charge is even more groundless.

The Ryan plan would slowly phase in a premium support option, in which the government would give people money to buy insurance. This general idea was embraced by Bill Clinton's bipartisan Medicare reform commission. It follows a similar design to the prescription drug benefit. Its effectiveness is unproved, but it's a time-tested and respectable proposal, with expert support.

Obama treated it as some sort of alien monster from the lunatic fringe. He made a series of specific accusations that have been easily swatted away by the Ryan defenders: That the Ryan plan would allow the insurance companies to cherry-pick the healthiest seniors (in fact, there are specific passages in the plan forbidding that); the Ryan plan would mean lower benefits for seniors (in fact, the plan would guarantee seniors the equivalent of current benefits while giving them other options).

As I say, I have my own problems with Ryan's plan, which Obama identified. But Ryan has at least taken a big step toward an eventual fiscal solution. He's proposed necessary structural entitlement reforms, which the Democrats are unwilling to do. He's proposed real tax reform, which the Democrats are also unwilling to do.

The first truth is that we will have to do these big things to avoid a fiscal calamity. The second truth is there is no one-party solution; there has to be a merger of respectable ideas. The third truth is that gimmicky speeches obscure the president's best character and make it seem as if he doesn't understand the scope of the calamity looming in front of us.

Obama shouldn't be sniping at Ryan. He should be topping him with something bigger and better.