

## Steve Barnes: It's hard to accept odd logic of costume-party refugees

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I spent Monday night outside my physical self. I think it's called an out-of-body experience. I'm late to the game; everybody I know claims to have had at least one. Or perhaps I was just tired. Anyway, I have Osama bin Laden to thank for bringing me out of it.

I never thought I would laugh at bin Laden, never saw anything funny about him. Until Monday night. But I'm ahead of myself.

Otherwise engaged during the day and unable to stay as abreast of the day's news as I prefer, I returned home from the road with some take-out and sat at the kitchen counter, turned on the little TV set and tuned to see what C-Span was offering. A Tea Party press conference. A couple of dudes in colonial costumes were holding forth (and one of them holding a musket) on federal spending and the impending vote on the debt ceiling. They were joined by a couple of other dudes from the Cato Institute, the libertarian think tank that has never met a tax increase it liked nor ever seen one it thought justified. They were wearing something more contemporary, and looked a bit uncomfortable against the Revolutionary-era mufti and musket of the

Tea Partiers, but as their message was essentially the same I gathered their unease was sartorial rather than fiscal.

Congressional Republicans, the quartet sang, had sold them out. Cut, cut, cut spending — now. Trillions. And cut discretionary spending by "at least" half. If the RINOs (Republicans in Name Only) and the Democrats won't go along, then refuse to increase the debt limit, let the Treasury default, to hell with the international markets and all the rest of it. And never mind that discretionary spending (only about 12 percent of the budget) finances such extraneous baubles as the FBI, air traffic control, meat and dairy inspectors, that sort of thing. The U.S. departments of Labor, Commerce, Energy, Education — all unconstitutional, one of the patriots insisted.

The guy dressed as George Washington allowed that there might be room for a bit of compromise: if the armed forces would stop sending women into combat zones and prevent gays from serving in the

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military, then perhaps a little less in spending cuts would be necessary. (If that logic appeals to you then you're having an out-of-body experience, too).

I flipped up one channel to C-Span 2. There's a fellow dressed much like the Cato folks back in Washington. He is speaking before the Economic Club of New York. His take is essentially identical to the demand of the Cato guys and their pals in period garb. Except he is not a refugee from a costume party but the Speaker of the House, and he's declaring that federal default is imminent without "trillions" in spending cuts. Everything is on the table, he says.

Except tax increases.

The tax ban — it can be expected of the three Arkansans of the Speaker's party in the House, and perhaps a fourth, the delegation's only, if nominal, Democrat. Both senators from Arkansas, the Republican for certain, the Democrat, probably, will concur that now is a bad time to raise taxes, even on the very wealthiest. Because it would be a "job-killer." And because, in the most cosmic insult of all, "Washington doesn't have a revenue problem, it has a spending problem."

To another channel I traveled, this one featuring videotapes snatched from bin Laden's compound by the Navy SEALs who snuffed him. Bin Laden is shown rehearsing for one of his video messages. He has died his beard jet black. Blacker than that. Absurdly black. He looks not like a demon

but a clown.

Charlie Chaplin proved, in "The Great Dictator," that laughing at a madman not only could be therapeutic but could humanize, cut down to size, a figure so menacing that he is drawn in supernatural hues — Dracula, the Wolfman — until he is made to appear ridiculous. In 1940, Chaplin's target was Hitler. In 2011, bin Laden was his own if inadvertent target, even before the SEALs made him theirs.

Would that laughter do for national finance — bring us back down to Earth — what it did this one time for international terrorism.

A friend, a veteran of another war, told me once of a sedative he discovered when the pressures and perils of Vietnam seemed to threaten his sanity. He could look to his west and see the carnage of the conflict, the lives and treasure lost, or he could turn east and watch the sun rise over the South China Sea, "one of the prettiest vistas you can imagine. Really soothing." It was his

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out-of-body experience.

You can think of no new taxes and Tea Party ideology, and the rules of mathematics upended. Or you can think of bin Laden's beard. Out-of-body experiences, your choice.

Steve Barnes is a veteran Arkansas journalist and moderator of AETN's "Arkansas This Week."

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