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Scold Your Own

By *PETER CATAPANO*

[The Thread](#) is an in-depth look at how major news and controversies are being debated across the online spectrum.

Tags:

[budget](#), [debt ceiling](#), [democrats](#), [republicans](#), [Tea Party](#)

Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images Senator John McCain spoke with reporters after leaving the Republican caucus meeting in the Capitol on Monday. He was among several conservatives to criticize Tea Party members' stance on the debt agreement.

11:58 p.m. | Updated to reflect news developments.

Well, something finally happened.

The Times [reported](#) Friday evening:

House Republicans muscled through a revised debt limit plan without a single Democratic vote on Friday night and headed toward a confrontation with the Senate, where Democrats were anxiously awaiting the newly passed measure so they could reject it. President Obama has also threatened to veto it.

About 24 hours after the first Republican proposal backed by Speaker John A. Boehner stalled, the House voted 218 to 210 to approve a plan that would increase the federal debt ceiling in two stages, with the second installment of \$1.6 trillion contingent on Congressional approval of a Constitutional amendment requiring a balanced federal budget. The Constitutional amendment provision was added to attract conservatives who balked Thursday.

It is exciting, isn't it? But of course the wrangling is far from over. The Senate quickly rejected the plan, and the days leading up to the Aug. 2 deadline are sure to be filled with counterattacks and reversals. But it might be a good moment to ask, how was the House resistance to Boehner's plan softened in the first place? "

Perhaps it was the specter of possible global embarrassment.

The Atlantic's James Fallows spent most of the week pointing out the sheer [irrationality of the arguments](#) fueling the crisis, but also the deeper problems that the stalemate portends. On Wednesday, Fallows [wrote](#):

I really am not interested in the Bush-v-Obama, red-v-blue allocation of the blame.

The point is the fundamental irrationality of insisting on cutting the deficit, while also insisting on preserving every penny of the tax cuts. One or the other: OK. Both of them: You're making it up. This is turning us into an international laughing stock, and it threatens to do more than that.

Perhaps, but probably not. It is worth noting that among the increasingly urgent calls for compromise this week, were a handful of seasoned conservatives who warned that the unwillingness of the Tea Party holdouts to yield their stated principles in the short term was endangering the Republican party's chances to take back the White House in 2012.

Here are a few of the more prominent among them.

In The Washington Post, Charles Krauthammer [explained it this way](#):

I have every sympathy with the conservative counterrevolutionaries. Their containment of the Obama experiment has been remarkable. But reversal — rollback, in Cold War parlance — is simply not achievable until conservatives receive a mandate to govern from the White House.

Lincoln is reputed to have said: I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky. I don't know whether conservatives have God on their side (I keep getting sent to His voice mail), but I do know that they don't have Kentucky — they don't have the Senate, they don't have the White House. And under our constitutional system, you cannot govern from one house alone. Today's resurgent conservatism, with its fidelity to constitutionalism, should be particularly attuned to this constraint, imposed as it is by a system of deliberately separated — and mutually limiting — powers.

Given this reality, trying to force the issue — turn a blocking minority into a governing authority — is not just counter-constitutional in spirit but self-destructive in practice.

The Cato Institute's Roger Pilon concurred, [warning](#) that “if Tea Party members overplay their hand, they play right into Obama's hand, politically, going into 2012, when the battle over *real change* will be waged.” Pilon, among others, turned to the founding struggles in American history to make his point:

No war — and that's what we're in — was won in a day. It took 80 years for John Locke's ideas about liberty to find their way into the Declaration of Independence. It took another 90 years for those ideas to bring an end to slavery. The limited-government ideas that the Tea Party has brought back to the surface are just now being felt in Congress. This is no time to abandon them. But neither is it a time to set the course of events back, perhaps irretrievably, by employing them unwisely. Take what you can, and live to fight another day, on the battlefield that lies just ahead.

Another conservative stalwart, Thomas Sowell, [also rang the founding fathers bell](#) in his syndicated column, in which he advised hardliners to work “toward getting a better deal later,

when the odds are more in your favor.”

There would not be a United States of America today if George Washington’s army had not retreated and retreated and retreated, in the face of an overwhelmingly more powerful British military force bent on annihilating Washington’s troops.

Later, when the conditions were right for attack, General Washington attacked. But he would have had nothing to attack with if he had wasted his troops in battles that would have wiped them out.

Similar principles apply in politics. As Edmund Burke said more than two centuries ago: “Preserving my principles unshaken, I reserve my activity for rational endeavors.” ...

There are a lot of things to weigh against each other, not only as regards the economy, but also what the consequences to this nation would be to have Barack Obama get re-elected and go further down the dangerous path he has put us on, at home and abroad. Is it worth that risk to make a futile symbolic vote in Congress?

One of the good things about the tea party movement is that it resisted the temptation to actually form a third political party, which has been an exercise in futility, time and time again, under the American electoral system.

But, if the tea party movement within the Republican Party becomes just a rule-or-ruin minority, then they might just as well have formed a separate third party and gone on to oblivion.

I guess we should not be surprised that the Republican who really got other Republicans hopped up was John McCain. Speaking on the Senate floor Wednesday, McCain recited a passage, below, from a Wall Street Journal editorial that [that cast the Tea Party in a rather dark and moldy place](#):

[W]hat none of these critics have is an alternative strategy for achieving anything nearly as fiscally or politically beneficial as Mr. Boehner’s plan. The idea seems to be that if the House GOP refuses to raise the debt ceiling, a default crisis or gradual government shutdown will ensue, and the public will turn en masse against . . . Barack Obama. The Republican House that failed to raise the debt ceiling would somehow escape all blame. Then Democrats would have no choice but to pass a balanced-budget amendment and reform entitlements, and the tea-party Hobbits could return to Middle Earth having defeated Mordor.

(Wow. It’s hard to know what to say.)

“This is the kind of crack political thinking that turned Sharron Angle and Christine O’Donnell into G.O.P. Senate nominees,” said the man who chose Sarah Palin as his running mate. “The reality is that the debt limit will be raised one way or another, and the only issue now is with how much fiscal reform and what political fallout.”

Angle and others soon [piled on in response](#).

Or is it too idealistic to think that some in the House absorbed the informed, dispassionate insight that did emerge in the debate this week. Several commentators cited The Times David Leonhardt, who in his last Economic Scene column, “Lessons From the Malaise,” [wrote eloquently](#) about what happens — or rather what doesn’t happen — when a nation refuses to apply common sense and logic to its problems:

The [recent economic] malaise obviously has several causes, some of which are beyond our control. One major cause, however, is entirely our doing. We do not spend enough time focusing on our actual economic problems.

We are too often occupied with distractions, rather than trying to answer a simple question: What works? What economic policies have succeeded before and are most likely to lead to the best life for the largest number of people? Instead, we’ve effectively decided that because the United States is the richest, most successful country in the world, it is guaranteed to remain so.

The richest and most successful, indeed, as long as you don’t count [Steve Jobs](#).

This post has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: July 30, 2011

An earlier version of this article mistakenly identified Sen. John McCain as the author of an editorial in The Wall Street Journal criticizing Tea Party members. Mr. McCain did not write it, but read the quoted passage aloud while speaking on the Senate floor.