

Rural Defeat, Rural Denial, and the Farm Bill Conference

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This has been an historic, discouraging, and informative week in American politics, and the American people have had it. Really, can all this possibly become any more surreal?

“Civil” Wars

In the midst of our Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration, an incident which reflects early Northern excitement for battle, and optimism for a quick, decisive victory, serves as an instructive antecedent for our current dilemma. As the first Battle of Bull Run began, reporters, Congressmen, and ordinary citizens from Washington, D.C. arrived on horseback and in surreys to enjoy the day and watch this early battle for our nation's future, from a safe distance. However, as the slaughter bloodily unfolded before their eyes, the realities of war-its chaos, unpredictability, and awful cost settled upon them and darkened their far more somber ride home for dinner. Such is the nature of hubris.

In a modern day rendition of similar absurdity, this week world financial ministers from around the globe put on their Sunday best, powdered their furrowed brows, attached diplomatic smiles, and jetted to D.C., for a three-day meeting of the World Bank Group (WBG) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). After meeting at an equally safe distance from the insanity of our current political battleground, they quickly departed our Capitol Sunday, with only one sentence of reference in their closing communique regarding the U.S. political stalemate. One hopes these leaders from the 188 IMF member nations will not be infected by our uniquely American political pandemic. Tuesday, when the bond markets reopen, the extent of the contagion will be clearer. In any case, hubris continues.

Watching IMF's Managing Director Christine Lagarde's interview on Meet the Press Sunday was most uncomfortable. The world's most powerful nation and economy, whose currency sustains global trust in our international order, hosts this gathering in a Capitol whose political antics would embarrass banana republics, and whose political leaders continue to urge discussion of compromise, but engage in none. A closed government, 800,000 Americans out of work, the needed federal services they provide gone, with untold human and financial costs and losses-you pick the \$ Billion number you wish-all bantered about as though they were rounding error. But we know they most assuredly are not, and U.S. default remains a very real possibility.

From Economic Recession to Political Depression

This week produced another equally troubling perspective on our political malaise. NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal* released significant national poll findings from interviews conducted October 7-9. While Democrats were quick to seek partisan advantage in the results, the deeper story is very distressing. Their poll found nearly 80% of Americans believe we are headed in the wrong direction—a watershed number for this poll, not seen since the Watergate crisis in the Nixon Administration. Furthermore, 60% of our fellow citizens would vote to force every Member of Congress, including their own Representative, out of office, were such an opportunity available to them. Finally, almost half of us no longer self-identify with either of our nation's major political parties.

We remain a deeply divided nation, but we agree on one thing: we are completely frustrated with the current political establishment, which NBC's Chuck Todd characterized as “Political Depression.” This poll is as nonpartisan as a national poll gets, and wrong-track numbers anywhere near this level usually only surface during global conflicts or around deep pocketbook distress. Fortunately, we are extricating ourselves from both of those dynamics. But this may be actually more troubling, as this is about our political life, how we govern ourselves as a people, and how little trust or hope we have in its current practice.

We have yet to fully understand the depth of this challenge or its potential impact. And that is very worrisome. For most of us who comprise the “great center” of the American people, the current political establishment seems out of touch, mostly engaged in personal or party bickering about who is to blame for what is about to occur. This truly defines the classic political “fiddling while Rome burns!”

In the Midst, A Farm Bill Conference

Despite all this, there was some apparently good news this week for Ag and Rural interests. House Republicans and Democrats finally named conferees to negotiate on what can still loosely be called The Farm Bill.

Entering the third week since the expiration of historic Farm Bill programs, it is quite evident that major hurdles await these conferees. The House Republican Leadership appointed Rep. Steve Southerland (FL) to the Conference, as well as two Members from the House Foreign Affairs and Ways & Means Committees. The Democratic Leadership countered these appointments with Ohio Congresswoman Marcia Fudge, Chairperson of the Congressional Black Caucus, and one of the House's strongest advocates for SNAP and Nutrition programming. Saturday, the full House defeated a motion offered by Ranking Member Colin Peterson (MN) that would have instructed House conferees to accede to Senate language which authorizes both the Commodity

and Nutrition Titles for five years, as opposed to the House, which has passed two separate bills: a three-year Nutrition Title, and a five-year Commodity Title. Clearly, reconciling these differences will be among the more challenging issues before the Conference Committee. House Chairman Frank Lucas and Ranking Member Peterson have an extremely difficult dynamic before them, before ever engaging their Senate colleagues. For starters, the conferees are only two years and \$35 Billion apart.

In reality, this conference will be unlike any in prior Ag Committee history. And this is a major setback for Ag and Rural interests. This fact will probably be little discussed publicly, for fear of political reprisal. Most advocates remain in denial regarding this subtle usurpation of historic Ag Committee standing; and, given the great relief that any conference is actually occurring, much will be overlooked. But this conference has been out of the actual control of the House Chairman and Ranking Member for some time, as much has been unfortunately framed to a large degree by differences between leadership perspectives within the U.S. House, and reflective of the far deeper ideological differences which reside there, in the full body.

Rural interests are losing on multiple fronts in this current federal debacle: ranchers suffering catastrophic losses from last week's snowstorm, rural entrepreneurs and first-time homebuyers about to close loans, poor rural children and families left without critical child care or nutrition programs, the rural workers and small business owners who would finally have been offered health coverage at an affordable price. But so are many urban citizens. The tragedy for rural America is that so many of the Congressional Members who have supported this shutdown are doing so with the understanding that their rural constituents are ideologically behind them, and support their actions. This may have been so from a safe distance, with the excitement of the ideological war and easy victory before them. Hubris, once again. However, the reality of battle, its actual chaos and costs create new urgencies, far more pressing. Hopefully, these lessons are now being learned.

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