

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
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Last week, I blissfully dropped off the grid and onto the Green River.

Emerging a week later, I discovered the Republicans in the House of Representatives now run the national government.

Not technically, of course – there’s a Democrat in the White House, and more Democrats than Republicans in the Senate. But for all practical purposes, the debt ceiling debate showed that House Republicans now control the national political agenda.

And will for at least the next six years, or until President Obama recaptures the fire he had as a candidate. Until then, though, it’s all about the House Republicans. There are five reasons for this.

First, House Republicans are solidly united around three bedrock beliefs:

- They loathe government;
- They loathe taxes;
- They loathe anyone who tries to keep them from controlling that which they loathe, namely the government and taxes.

If I were a psychologist, I’d have a field day with this desire to control that which is loathed. But since I’m not, I’ll move onto the second reason: The House GOP embraces their bedrock beliefs with a messianic fervor. As a result, they’re willing to sacrifice for their beliefs. Or, more precisely, they’re willing to have someone else sacrifice for their beliefs. The nation’s credit rating; America’s economic stability; those who will be affected by the massive budget cuts they demanded and won (with even more to come); it doesn’t matter. To them, it’s the best of all worlds: they posture, and someone else pays.

Third, the lesson they learned from the debt ceiling debacle was that zealotry works. As a result, they’ll continue to push their beliefs with increasing stridency, ensuring many more debacles to come.

Fourth, their opponents are hapless. Tactically, the Democrats clearly have no clue how to fight the Republicans’ zealotry. And philosophically, the only thing the last few months have made clear is that Congressional Democrats don’t seem to have an overarching philosophy.

With President Obama, it’s a bit different, for he holds a transcendent belief that the nation’s leaders can come together to find common solutions to our common problems. And while this is a mature approach to leadership, its fatal flaw is that we aren’t living in mature times. As a result, the President ends up cutting deals with people who clearly don’t want to make deals, leaving him as the Republicans’ handmaiden and leaving the Democrats in a position where their battle cry for 2012 will be something like “Well, um, without us, things would be a lot worse.” The pulse races.

The fifth and final reason is an extension of the fourth: Unless President Obama can regain his 2008 mojo, no matter who is elected President in 2012, he or she will be operating in an environment defined by the House Republicans’ agenda.

In the current political environment, the only chance President Obama has for re-election is if the Republicans nominate someone so extreme that he or she will be un-electable in the general election. But even if that happens, the Republicans will still win: they’ll control the political agenda and win most legislative battles, but still be able to blame the President for the continually-sputtering economy.

For the reality is that, barring some significant change, America's economy will continue to sputter, and do so for another several years. There are two reasons for this; one structural, the other political.

The structural reason is that the current economic collapse is not a conventional recession, but a worldwide credit contraction. Historically, it takes 5-7 years for such contractions to work their way through the system, which means that by the time President Obama finishes his second term, things might actually be poised for growth. Which would suit the GOP just fine, for after eight years of national economic agony under a Democratic president, the GOP candidate would almost certainly win, then be able to take credit for something over which she or he had no control.

The political reason is that the GOP has absolutely no incentive to support steps that might improve the economy. Over the next year, President Obama and Congressional Democrats will be desperate to make deals to boost the economy. However, Congressional Republicans will block any meaningful efforts in that direction, because their self-interest will be best served by letting things languish – the worse the economy, the better their chances in 2012. And 2014. And 2016. As a result, unless the Democrats can figure out how to combat the Republicans' zealotry, we'll have to wait another 5 years or so before the national and global economy rebound in any significant fashion.

So much for my post-river bliss.

Why mention all this? Because the way Washington deals with the current economic mess is going to have two consequences for Jackson Hole. The first is that, like the rest of the country, we need to gird our loins for a long period of national economic stagnation, and plan accordingly.

The other is that, because the House Republicans will continue to focus on reducing the deficit exclusively through spending cuts, we in Jackson Hole face a potentially existential threat to our long-term economic well-being: Those charged with ensuring the health of our public lands are about to experience significant reductions in their budgets. As they do, it will fall upon those who live here to become much more active stewards of the natural world around us.

Here's why. In 2009, Congress appropriated \$13.4 million to operate Grand Teton National Park and the John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway. In 2012, the park will receive perhaps \$12 million, a 5-10 percent cut from this year's level. Net result? Next year, even though visitation will likely be markedly higher than it was a few years ago, Grand Teton will have perhaps 10 percent less money to spend.

Things will be even worse for the Bridger-Teton National Forest, which will likely have around 25 percent less to spend next year than they had in 2009 (Table 1).

And those figures don't take into account the just-concluded deficit ceiling deal, which will lead to even more cuts. Nor the additional cuts which will no doubt occur when the House Republicans throw their next hissy fit and extract another trillion or three from the federal budget. Then, to take it up yet another notch, the discretionary spending that funds the national parks and forests will almost certainly suffer a disproportionately high level of cutbacks, for it won't be protected to the same degree as defense and entitlement programs.

But the real kicker will be the antipathy House Republicans feel toward the agencies charged with protecting our environment and natural resources. As a result, it's almost certain that over the next decade, the National Park Service and Forest Service will suffer not just significant budget cuts, but disproportionately high budget cuts. The net result will be that, looking back on things, both Grand Teton and the Bridger-Teton will view the early 21st century as the last time they were flush with federal funds.

All this means that, if the park and forest are going to be conserved for future generations, we who

live in this paradise are going to have to take a more active role. Why? Because not only does someone have to do it, but it's in our self-interest: Ultimately, Jackson Hole's economy can never be healthier than that of the public lands surrounding us. And since the feds won't be providing the resources land managers will need to properly do their jobs, it's going to fall onto us not just to provide those resources, but figure out what exactly it is that needs to be done.

And of course our responsibilities to the land become even more significant when you consider that, thanks to the lodging tax, we'll soon be spending millions of dollars a year to try to bring increasing numbers of people here to use those lands.

As the Chinese curse goes, we're living not just in interesting times, but in times that are about to become far more interesting. In such an environment, we'll need to identify and embrace a style of leadership that combines not only vision and strength, but an appreciation for facts, nuance, complexity, and the need for compromise. Sadly, that seems to be sorely lacking in Washington right now; happily, that presents more opportunity for us.

Table 1
Grand Teton National Park + John D. Rockefeller Memorial Parkway and Bridger-Teton National Forest
Congressionally-Appropriated Budgets: FY 2009-2011 (actual); FY 2012 (projected)

Fiscal Year	Grand Teton NP + JDR Parkway			Bridger-Teton National Forest			Combined		
	Budget	Change v. Previous Yr.		Budget	Change v. Previous Yr.		Budget	Change v. Previous Yr.	
		\$	%		\$	%		\$	%
2009	\$13,440,000			\$19,744,039			\$33,184,039		
2010	\$13,500,000	\$60,000	0%	\$18,696,590	-\$1,047,449	-5%	\$32,196,590	-\$987,449	-3%
2011	\$13,100,000	-\$400,000	-3%	\$16,468,090	-\$2,228,500	-12%	\$29,568,090	-\$2,628,500	-8%
2012 (projected)	\$12,117,500	-\$982,500	-8%	\$15,232,983	-\$1,235,107	-8%	\$27,350,483	-\$2,217,607	-8%
Net change 2009-2012		-\$1,322,500	-10%		-\$4,511,056	-23%		-\$5,833,556	-18%