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Let's Not Be Civil

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Last week, President Obama offered a spirited defense of his party's values — in effect, of the legacy of the New Deal and the Great Society. Immediately thereafter, as always happens when Democrats take a stand, the civility police came out in force. The president, we were told, was being too partisan; he needs to treat his opponents with respect; he should have lunch with them, and work out a consensus.

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That's a bad idea. Equally important, it's an undemocratic idea.

Let's review the story so far.

Two weeks ago, House Republicans released their big budget proposal, selling it to credulous pundits as a statement of necessity, not ideology — a document telling America What Must Be Done.

But it was, in fact, a deeply partisan document, which you might have guessed from the opening sentence: "Where the president has failed, House Republicans will lead." It hyped the danger of deficits, yet even on its own (not at all credible) accounting, spending cuts were used mainly to pay for tax cuts rather than deficit reduction. The transparent and

obvious goal was to use deficit fears to impose a vision of small government and low taxes, especially on the wealthy.

So the House budget proposal revealed a yawning gap between the two parties' priorities. And it revealed a deep difference in views about how the world works.

When the proposal was released, it was praised as a "wonk-approved" plan that had been run by the experts. But the "experts" in question, it turned out, were at the Heritage Foundation, and few people outside the hard right found their conclusions credible. In the words of the consulting firm Macroeconomic Advisers — which makes its living telling businesses what they need to know, not telling politicians what they want to hear — the Heritage analysis was "both flawed and contrived." Basically, Heritage went all in on the much-refuted claim that cutting taxes on the wealthy produces miraculous economic results, including a surge in revenue that

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actually reduces the deficit.

By the way, Heritage is always like this. Whenever there's something the G.O.P. doesn't like — say, environmental protection — Heritage can be counted on to produce a report, based on no economic model anyone else recognizes, claiming that this policy would cause huge job losses. Correspondingly, whenever there's something Republicans want, like tax cuts for the wealthy or for corporations, Heritage can be counted on to claim that this policy would yield immense economic benefits.

The point is that the two parties don't just live in different moral universes, they also live in different intellectual universes, with Republicans in particular having a stable of supposed experts who reliably endorse whatever they propose.

So when pundits call on the parties to sit down together and talk, the obvious question is, what are they supposed to talk about? Where's the common ground?

Eventually, of course, America must choose between these differing visions. And we have a way of doing that. It's called democracy.

Now, Republicans claim that last year's midterms gave them a mandate for the vision embodied in their budget. But last year the G.O.P. ran against what it called the "massive Medicare cuts" contained in the health reform law. How, then, can the election have provided a mandate for a plan that not only would preserve all of those cuts, but would go on, over time, to dismantle Medicare completely?

For what it's worth, polls suggest that the public's priorities are nothing like those embodied in the Republican budget. Large majorities support higher, not lower, taxes on the wealthy. Large majorities — including a majority of Republicans — also oppose major changes to Medicare. Of course, the poll that matters is the one on Election Day. But that's all the more reason to make the 2012 election a clear choice between visions.

Which brings me to those calls for a bipartisan solution. Sorry to be cynical, but right now "bipartisan" is usually code for assembling some conservative Democrats and ultraconservative Republicans — all of them with close ties to the wealthy, and many who are wealthy themselves — and having them proclaim that low taxes on high incomes and drastic cuts in social insurance are the only possible solution.

This would be a corrupt, undemocratic way to make decisions about the shape of our society even if those involved really were wise men with a deep grasp of the issues. It's much worse when many of those at the table are the sort of people who solicit and believe the kind of policy analyses that the Heritage Foundation supplies.

So let's not be civil. Instead, let's have a frank discussion of our differences. In particular, if Democrats believe that Republicans are talking cruel nonsense, they should say so — and take their case to the voters.

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