
Jeffrey Sachs: Restoring American Democracy

It is hard to exaggerate the disaster that passes for American democracy these days. Have a look at today's news. A «historic» cut in spending has been achieved, the «largest in history,» \$38.5 billion. Yet what is actually in this spending cut? There is no report of that. You can't find the list of cuts in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, or anywhere else. The negotiations are a show, a TV cliffhanger, not a negotiation over actual programs affecting 300 million Americans.

Does the list of budget cuts even exist? Were the negotiations about a number (\$38.5 billion, or \$61 billion, or something else) but not specific programs? If there was no list, how did the negotiators decide on how much to cut? If there is a list, why haven't the American people seen even a glimpse of it all week, even after the negotiations have been concluded?

Of course neither the White House nor congressional leadership has shown the slightest interest in keeping the American people informed about any step of this process, and they have evinced even less interest in reflecting the values and opinions of the American people. Public opinion counts for almost nothing these days in guiding public policy.

The White House is basically an ally of the Republican Party. Even the president's words chortle with delight:

«A few months ago, I was able to sign a tax cut for American families because both parties worked through their differences and found common ground. Now, the same cooperation has made it possible for us to move forward with the biggest annual spending cut in history.» It reminds me of the old Russian joke:

«We were at the edge of the cliff. Now we've taken a giant step forward.»

President Obama's words are incredible. The tax deal last December was perhaps the greatest domestic policy shame of our time. In that particular capitulation to greed, he agreed to extend the tax breaks for the richest Americans, slash their estate taxes, give other corporate tax breaks, and raise the deficit by nearly \$1 trillion over 2011 and 2012. Now, he has agreed with the far right to slash entitlements spending for the poor in another «historic» act of cooperation. One more such historic act of cooperation and we'll be completely ruined.

The president says yesterday's accord «is an agreement to invest in our country's future,» but that «needed infrastructure projects will be delayed.» He says that in tough times, families sacrifice to «afford what's really important,» but that «programs people rely on will be cut back.» There is, of course, not a shred of sacrifice by Wall Street, Big Oil, the nation's millionaires and billionaires, the health insurance industry, or any of the other lobbies that the president and much of Congress count on to fund their re-election campaigns.

In poll after poll, the actual views of the public about the budget are clear: cut military spending, raise taxes on the rich, and cut health care costs by taking on private health insurers. These are the policies put forward last week in the [«People's Budget»](#) (which [I recently wrote about](#)) proposed by the leaders of the [Congressional Progressive Caucus](#).

Even though we don't know the still secret details of the \$38.5 billion in the cuts, we can be sure that not one of these sensible mainstream ideas is even re-

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motely represented in the new «historic» agreement. The president and the congressional leadership of both parties are pursuing the opposite strategy: cut taxes for the rich; sustain record-high military spending and indeed a growing number of wars; turn over even more of health care to price-gouging private health insurers; and cut urgently needed help for the poor, the public schools, higher education, and the unemployed.

In the end, we have gotten from President Obama what we feared from Senator McCain: an expanded war in Afghanistan, an extension of the Bush-era tax cuts, sharp cuts in spending for communities and programs for the poor, a continuation of Guantanamo and military tribunals, unchecked bankers' pay and bonuses, and enough loopholes to reduce corporate taxes to less than 2 percent of GDP this year, despite a boom in corporate profits.

America, sooner rather than later, will gear up for a new political movement, one that is dedicated to fairness and justice as in the People's Budget rather than to corporate wealth as in today's budget agreement. Sooner rather than later, perhaps even by next year, a presidential candidate and dozens of congressional candidates will succeed in doing what President Obama could and should have done in 2008: to win on the basis of small donations and social networks without the need to sell out to Wall Street, the oil industry, and the other lobbies. It can be done, though Obama in fact went for the big corporate donors as well.

Many in the Huffington Post community of readers and writers think that things are already too late for America. They believe that our democracy has been irretrievably lost to the special interests. I share their frustration but believe there is real reason for hope. We are at the stage of history when the curtain is being pulled back to reveal the Wizards of Oz. The political spin-masters in the White House and Congress, the media manipulators led by Rupert

Murdoch, and the oil money led by the Koch Brothers will all come to learn that despite their vast wealth and cynicism, they will not stop Americans from reclaiming their democracy.

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