

# ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

### *The Collapse of the Supercommittee on the Budget*

Just before Thanksgiving, congressional leaders admitted that there would be no deal to reduce the US budget deficit by \$1.2 trillion over ten years. Although this is not a surprise, it has significant ramifications for our nation. In this first *Perspective*, I seek to place this entire discussion into a broader understanding.

- First, a comment about the role of President Obama. It is manifestly clear that the president chose to remain quite disengaged from this entire process of debt reduction by the supercommittee. His campaign leaders and his White House staff have declared that the president believes that the Republicans will never agree to raise taxes on the wealthy to balance any spending cuts, so he will let the voters decide next November. He will campaign by contrasting his “balanced” approach to putting the nation on a solid footing to the Republicans’ antitax reliance on spending cuts, especially for Social Security and Medicare. His strategy of not engaging Congress and of remaining aloof from the discussion is dangerous—for him politically and, perhaps more importantly, for the nation. He is failing to lead on a serious threat to the nation’s future, the mounting federal debt. The historian, Robert Dallek, argues that Obama is borrowing from the strategy adopted by Harry Truman, in 1948: Truman blamed a “do-nothing” Congress for the nation’s ills, and thereby defied all expectations and won re-election. But I am not certain this will work. There is one haunting reality that the president cannot ignore—and I believe the voters will not ignore either: President Obama appointed the Simpson-Bowles commission, which studied the debt situation of the US extensively and proposed a completely bi-partisan approach to reducing the federal deficit—and the President of the United States, who appointed the commission and empowered them to arrive at a solution, completely ignored their recommendations. The Simpson-Bowles commission was a sterling example of bi-partisanship. Indeed, Warren Buffett declared that “I think what happened with Simpson-Bowles was an absolute tragedy. They work like the devil for 10 months. . . . They compromise. They bring people as far apart as [Democratic Senator Dick] Durbin and [Republican Senator Tom] Coburn to get them to sign on and then they’re totally ignored. I think that’s a travesty.” In fact, columnist Tom Friedman has gone so far as to advocate that Obama declare that he made a mistake in spurning his own deficit reduction commission and that he is now adopting Simpson-Bowles “as his long-term fiscal plan to be phased in after a near-term stimulus.” Now this “near-term stimulus” will be controversial, but when you have a liberal columnist like Friedman advocating the Simpson-Bowles commission’s solution, you take notice! The heart of Simpson-Bowles is substantial tax reform and revenue increases, a gasoline tax, deep defense cuts and cutbacks to both Social Security and Medicare. The so-called deficit plan Obama proposed in September was watered-down and no one took it seriously. As Charles

Krauthammer has correctly argued, “raising revenue through tax reform [as in Simpson-Bowles] is better than simply raising rates, which Democrats insist upon with near religious fervor. It is more economically efficient because it eliminates credits, carve-outs and deductions that grossly misallocate capital.” Simply raising the tax rates is a perverse way to solve our problems: (1) Raising rates needlessly slows economic growth, by penalizing work and by retaining inefficiency-inducing loopholes. (2) Obama’s coveted repeal of the Bush tax cuts could yield the Treasury, at the very most, \$80 billion a year, offsetting 2 cents on the dollar of government spending (\$3.6 trillion). (3) Hiking tax rates ignores the real drivers of debt, which, as Obama himself has acknowledged, are entitlements. In fact, the president seems so out of touch with reality that last February he presented to Congress a budget that would have actually increased spending!! It was voted down by the Senate in a 97 to 0 vote. In contrast, the Republicans in the House passed a budget that cut \$5.8 trillion of spending over 10 years. To no one’s surprise, the Senate did not accept the House budget. Tom Friedman is correct: We have a well-thought through proposal—Simpson-Bowles—on the table. Let that be the starting point! It is bi-partisan and it accomplishes real tax reform, with concomitant revenue increases, and significantly reduces entitlement costs, which is the real problem with the deficit. Why will the president not lead on this? He is hoping that the voters will side with him next November. He is hoping that the voters will reject Simpson-Bowles and permit him and his party another four years of ignoring the need for meaningful tax reform and meaningful, substantive changes in our entitlement programs. Obama is not leading—and the nation will suffer more because of that.

- Second, what is often overlooked is that the deficit-raising deal Obama struck with Congress last summer has automatic adjustments built into the agreement. By law, the supercommittee’s failure triggers new caps on spending, cutting \$1.2 trillion from the military, education, health care and other priorities over 10 years beginning next fall. The combined impact of higher tax rates and less spending would reverse the growth of annual deficits beginning in 2013, reducing by more than half the current \$1.3 trillion gap between annual revenue and spending. This was part of the deal from last summer and it is automatic—unless Congress passes new legislation undoing this deal, which is a real possibility. In addition, there are several other key congressional decisions that loom in the near future: Congress must decide whether it will extend a payroll tax break for workers and continue supplemental benefits for the long-term unemployed, both of which are scheduled to expire at the end of the 2011 year. The tax break reduces the amount that workers must pay for Social Security; the extended benefits provide support for 3.5 million Americans who have been out of a job for longer than 26 weeks. In addition, Congress must decide by the end of next year the future of the Bush tax cuts. All of these decisions are of course wrapped around the poisonous political culture of Washington, D.C. Insightfully, columnist David Brooks observes that both political parties have “developed minority mentalities.” By this he means that their “main fear is that they will lose their identity and cohesion if their members compromise with the larger world. They erect clear and rigid boundaries separating themselves from their enemies. In a hostile world, they erect rules and pledges and become hypervigilant about deviationism. They are more interested in protecting their special interests than converting outsiders. They slowly encase themselves in an epistemic cocoon.” The result is an era of stagnation. Each party is too weak to push its own agenda and “too encased by its own cocoon to agree to a hybrid.” In short, America today lacks decisive leadership—both the

executive and legislative branches. This dismal failure of leadership is costing our nation dearly—and we are slipping quickly into a loss of influence and power around the world. Our children and our grandchildren will pay dearly for this vacuum of leadership at all levels of government. Perhaps we are simply getting the leaders we deserve!

See David Brooks in the *New York Times* (22 November 2011); Binyamin Appelbaum and Annie Lowery in the *New York Times* (22 November 2011); Charles Krauthammer in the *Washington Post* (24 November 2011); Tom Friedman in the *New York Times* (23 November 2011); and Jackie Calmes in the *New York Times* (22 November 2011).

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO**

### ***The Role of Parents in Educating Children***

Every three years, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) conducts exams as part of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), which tests 15-year olds in the world's leading industrialized nations on their reading comprehension and ability to use what they have learned in math and science. Compared with children in Singapore, Finland and Shanghai, China, America's 15-year olds have not been distinguishing themselves. As columnist Tom Friedman reports, Andreas Schleicher, who oversees the exams for the OECD, investigated what is behind the classroom in children tested—their families. Beginning with 4 nations in 2006 and adding 14 more in 2009, the PISA team went to parents of 5,000 students and interviewed them “about how they raised their kids and then compared that with the test results” for each of those years. What was the result?

1. Schleicher reported to Friedman that “fifteen-year old students whose parents often read books with them during their first year of primary school show markedly higher scores in PISA 2009 than students whose parents read with them infrequently or not at all. The performance advantage among students whose parents read to them in their early school years is evident regardless of the family's socioeconomic background. Parents engaging with their 15-year-olds is strongly associated with better performance in PISA.”
2. Schleicher explained that “just asking your child how was their school day and showing genuine interest in the learning they are doing can have the same impact as hours of private tutoring. It is something every parent can do, no matter what their education level or social background.”
3. Students whose parents reported that they had read a book with their child every day or almost every day during the first year of primary school have markedly higher PISA scores in PISA 2009 than students whose parents did not. On average the score difference is 25 points, the equivalent of well over half a school year.
4. He also reports that “on average, the score point difference in reading that is associated with parental involvement is largest when parents read a book with their child, when they talk about things they have done during the day, and when they tell stories to their children.”

5. Furthermore, a recent study by the National School Boards Associations Center for Public Education reports that, “Monitoring homework; making sure children get to school; rewarding their efforts and talking up the idea of going to college” are most likely to have an impact on academic achievement at school. In addition, the study “found that getting parents involved with their children’s learning at home is a more powerful driver of achievement than parents attending PTA and school board meetings, volunteering in classrooms, participating in fund-raising and showing up at back-to-school nights.”

In conclusion, our culture has spent trillions of dollars since 1965 on building expensive buildings, hiring well-qualified teachers and providing well-written textbooks, but none of this is as valuable as parents who care! We need good teachers; of that there is no doubt. We need good classrooms with all the technology; of that there is no doubt. We need textbooks that are sound and well-written; of that there is no doubt. But without parents who are engaged with their children, none of this will matter much. Nearly 3,500 years ago, Moses instructed the parents of Israel to teach and model the things of God to their children (Deuteronomy 6:1-7). That sound advice from Scripture is still relevant today! If the family is dysfunctional, the children will suffer. That self-evident axiom is now being worked out in our culture. Education is a cooperative effort between the school and the home. When the home does not exist, the schools will not be able to do it all. Increasingly, this is where so much of American education is today. We expect the schools to do it all—and they cannot! In fact, I believe quite strongly that true education is a cooperative effort between the public school, the parents and the church. That institutional triad provides the needed framework for successful education. Our postmodern culture will not permit the support of the church in this triad. So, it is up to the schools and the parents. When the parents are not there or not engaged, the schools will not be able to do the job. We need good teachers and we need good parents—and, as a Christian, I would add we need good churches. We should not be surprised when we read of the growing failure rates of our children on assessment exams. It is not all the fault of the teachers; it is the miserable failure of so many parents! God declared that 3,500 years ago. Perhaps it is time for us to re-acquaint ourselves with His paradigm for success!

See Friedman’s reports in the *New York Times* (20 November 2011).

## **PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE**

### ***Israel and Iran***

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) published a report on 8 November on Iran’s nuclear program. The IAEA says that it “has serious concerns regarding possible military dimensions to Iran’s nuclear program. After assessing carefully and critically the extensive information available to it, the agency finds the information to be, overall, credible . . . that Iran has carried out activities to the development of a nuclear explosive device.” A 12-page appendix to the report provides a compelling narrative of Iran’s progress towards become a nuclear power. *The Economist* reports that “It says that Iran created computer models of nuclear explosions in 2008 and 2009 and conducted experiments on nuclear triggers. It says that the simulations focused on how shock waves from conventional explosives could compress the spherical fuel at the core of a nuclear device, which starts the chain reaction that ends in an explosion. The report

goes on the state that Iran went beyond such theoretical studies and built a large containment vessel at its Parchin military base, starting in 2000, to test the feasibility of such explosive compression. It calls such tests ‘strong indicators of possible weapon development.’” Western intelligence sources believe that Iran now has enough highly enriched uranium to build at least one nuclear weapon within a year and that this could be followed rapidly by several more. What is not known is whether Iran can mount miniaturized warheads on its Shahab 3 ballistic missiles, which have a range of 1,200 miles. Obviously, such developments are a mortal threat to Israel. All of this has raised the possibility of Israel attacking Iranian nuclear facilities at Natanz, at Atak and at Bushehr. Why would Israel be contemplating this radical action now? There are four reasons: 1. Iran is rapidly moving centrifuges to its once-secret site at Fordow, buried deep inside a mountain and possibly invulnerable to attack by conventional weapons. 2. Syria’s internal chaos may take Iran’s most important regional ally out of the political game. 3. The departure of America’s forces from Iraq removes both a focus for Iranian retaliation and a constraint on America. 4. The weakened political clout of President Obama may actually aid Israel, for Obama needs the Jewish vote if he has any hope of re-election. Perhaps, they reason, Obama will support an effort to destroy Iran’s facilities.

Twice Israel destroyed two of its enemies who were building nuclear weapons—Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007. Both were successful. Israel legitimately fears the theocratic regime of Iran that embraces the Shia tradition of martyrdom. Those fears are genuine. The world community seems paralyzed to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons program. If it cannot, or will not act, Israel has little choice but a preemptive attack on Iran. Such an attack may not be imminent, but it is increasingly more probable. Year 2012 may be a most interesting year!

See *The Economist* (12 November 2011), pp. 16-18 and 53.