

The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)



November 22, 2010

There Will Be Blood

By **PAUL KRUGMAN**

Former Senator Alan Simpson is a Very Serious Person. He must be — after all, President Obama appointed him as co-chairman of a special commission on deficit reduction.

So here's what the very serious Mr. Simpson said on Friday: "I can't wait for the blood bath in April. ... When debt limit time comes, they're going to look around and say, 'What in the hell do we do now? We've got guys who will not approve the debt limit extension unless we give 'em a piece of meat, real meat,' " meaning spending cuts. "And boy, the blood bath will be extraordinary," he continued.

Think of Mr. Simpson's blood lust as one more piece of evidence that our nation is in much worse shape, much closer to a political breakdown, than most people realize.

Some explanation: There's a legal limit to federal debt, which must be raised periodically if the government keeps running deficits; the limit will be reached again this spring. And since nobody, not even the hawkiest of deficit hawks, thinks the budget can be balanced immediately, the debt limit must be raised to avoid a government shutdown. But Republicans will probably try to blackmail the president into policy concessions by, in effect, holding the government hostage; they've done it before.

Now, you might think that the prospect of this kind of standoff, which might deny many Americans essential services, wreak havoc in financial markets and undermine America's role in the world, would worry all men of good will. But no, Mr. Simpson "can't wait." And he's what passes, these days, for a reasonable Republican.

The fact is that one of our two great political parties has made it clear that it has no interest in making America governable, unless it's doing the governing. And that party now controls one house of Congress, which means that the country will not, in fact, be governable without that party's cooperation — cooperation that won't be forthcoming.

Elite opinion has been slow to recognize this reality. Thus on the same day that Mr. Simpson rejoiced in the prospect of chaos, Ben Bernanke, the Federal Reserve chairman, appealed for help in confronting mass unemployment. He [asked](#) for "a fiscal program that combines near-term measures to enhance growth with strong, confidence-inducing steps to reduce longer-term structural deficits."

My immediate thought was, why not ask for a pony, too? After all, the G.O.P. isn't interested in helping the economy as long as a Democrat is in the White House. Indeed, far from being willing to help Mr. Bernanke's efforts, Republicans are trying to bully the Fed itself into giving up completely on trying to reduce unemployment.

And on matters fiscal, the G.O.P. program is to do almost exactly the opposite of what Mr. Bernanke called for. On one side, Republicans oppose just about everything that might reduce structural deficits: they demand that the Bush tax cuts be made permanent while demagoguing efforts to limit the rise in Medicare costs, which are essential to any attempts to get the budget under control. On the other, the G.O.P. opposes anything that might help sustain demand in a depressed economy — even aid to small businesses, which the party claims to love.

Right now, in particular, Republicans are blocking an extension of unemployment benefits — an action that will both cause immense hardship and drain purchasing power from an already sputtering economy. But there's no point

appealing to the better angels of their nature; America just doesn't work that way anymore.

And opposition for the sake of opposition isn't limited to economic policy. Politics, they used to tell us, stops at the water's edge — but that was then.

These days, national security experts are tearing their hair out over the decision of Senate Republicans to block a desperately needed new strategic arms treaty. And everyone knows that these Republicans oppose the treaty, not because of legitimate objections, but simply because it's an Obama administration initiative; if sabotaging the president endangers the nation, so be it.

How does this end? Mr. Obama is still talking about bipartisan outreach, and maybe if he caves in sufficiently he can avoid a federal shutdown this spring. But any respite would be only temporary; again, the G.O.P. is just not interested in helping a Democrat govern.

My sense is that most Americans still don't understand this reality. They still imagine that when push comes to shove, our politicians will come together to do what's necessary. But that was another country.

It's hard to see how this situation is resolved without a major crisis of some kind. Mr. Simpson may or may not get the blood bath he craves this April, but there will be blood sooner or later. And we can only hope that the nation that emerges from that blood bath is still one we recognize.