



Changing the conversation

You've heard of the fog of war. Now we have the fog of political gridlock: Our political machinery grinding to a debilitating halt. A government *almost* prevented from paying its debts. An economy in distress with anemic economic growth, unemployment still staggeringly high, and seemingly no political will to exercise the limited economic tools the government has at its disposal.

And let's not forget an intransigent Republican-dominated Congress that is doing everything in its power to thwart an economic recovery by mandating unfair and economically disastrous and precipitous spending cuts.

Having trouble piercing the fog to understand what's really going on in Washington?

Can't gain the attention of your members of Congress to focus on this union's efforts to save six-day delivery and to relieve the Postal Service from the onerous mandate that it pre-fund future retiree health benefits at the rate of \$5.5 billion per year?

If so, you're certainly not alone.

As I write this, Congress has left town after weeks of absurd, high-stakes political warfare over raising the nation's debt ceiling so the United States can pay the bills it has *already* incurred.

How badly the U.S. economy will be hurt by what just transpired remains to be seen, but it's clear that from almost every perspective, our reputation as a mature democracy capable of resolving our differences through reasoned and intelligent compromise has been shattered.

Because a disciplined army of right-wing ideological zealots was willing to push our economy over the cliff, Congress and the president finally agreed to a deal that cuts spending (and thus consumer demand) just when a sputtering economy is threatening to stall out completely; punishes those least able to protect themselves from the economic collapse; and, by refusing to raise taxes on the wealthiest Americans and close corporate tax loopholes, guarantees that the unconscionable economic disparities in our society will balloon. Equally disastrous, the deal guarantees further hand-to-hand combat between the political parties in the months and years ahead.

Is this what the public voted for in 2010, when Republicans swept the elections?

I don't think so. Americans don't regard deficit reduction as the nation's No. 1 problem. "It's the economy, stupid"—not that our nation's politicians seem to recognize that.

Americans who don't have jobs want jobs, and those who have jobs want to hold onto them—or get better ones so they can keep a roof over their heads, feed their families and educate their children. That's not too hard to understand. Nor is it too much to expect.

And if the deficit has to be reduced over time, then Americans believe that, along with spending cuts, taxes should be raised on the wealthiest Americans. That's also neither too hard to understand nor too much to expect.

Neither is the fact that the public expects the Congress and the White House to focus on America's other real problems, such as repairing our roads and bridges, improving our educational system, investing wisely in new technologies and preserving our environment.

And did I mention keeping the USPS in business?

Sad to say, lost in the fog of our current political morass has been any serious and rational attempt to right the Postal Service's listing ship and ensure that letter carriers and other postal employees stay on the job and help to fuel a much-needed resurgence of the American economy.

Of all the problems facing our nation's lawmakers, the USPS' current ills should be among the easiest to solve. Legislation requiring the recalculation of the postal pension surplus using fair actuarial methods and then transferring this surplus to the USPS' Retiree Health Benefits Fund, as well as repealing the requirement mandating pre-funding of future retiree health benefits, would put the Service on sound financial footing. This would immediately put to rest the specter of eliminating six-day delivery.

That's why, with the debt ceiling issue at least temporarily resolved, it's up to all of us to redouble our efforts so that Congress understands that the USPS' financial problems must be resolved, and quickly.

But championing a legislative fix for the Postal Service is just one of our responsibilities.

We, along with other working Americans, have to change the terms of the debate. We need a Congress willing to jump-start the American economy, rebuild the middle class, restore the American dream, and create a future of opportunity and equality for all Americans.

Letter carriers won't be able to do it by ourselves. Nor will the entire American labor movement. As we march inexorably toward the crucial 2012 elections, Americans of every walk of life, of every political persuasion, rich and poor, young and old, must be recruited to turn this country around—by first changing the conversation. ☒