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# The Put-Up-or-Shut-Up Congress



By Marty Kaplan

Minutes after President Obama's hot-potato toss from the Rose Garden to Capitol Hill, "put up or shut up" soared on social media.

As with the sequester, Congress may devise a vote that takes no responsibility and leaves no fingerprints. Most Republicans think that giving Obama a flat yes on anything puts a bulls eye on them for primary challenges. A flat no, like the one Prime Minister Cameron got from Parliament, risks their being blamed for kneejerk partisanship and the next horror out of Syria. So to fudge things and evade accountability, Congress could construct, as Amy Davidson wrote in her *New Yorker* blog, "some legislative monstrosity, as it did during the debt-ceiling crisis, that relies on a complicated series of mechanisms that assure nothing — except that whatever happens is Obama's fault."

But "put up or shut up" is the snarly mood that's trending online. I think people welcome this chance to force members of Congress to grow a pair — and if not, to reap the humiliation and disgrace that they've sown.

It's tragic that it took the use of nerve gas to get to what's supposed to be a sober, grownup debate about international norms, but it's not surprising. After all, the Sandy Hook shootings didn't do that for the gun law debate, Hurricane Sandy didn't do it for climate change and the Great Recession didn't do it for "too big to fail." For that matter, widespread misery hasn't given us the debate we deserve about economic justice, decades of declining schools haven't done it for education and falling bridges haven't forced us to face up to our failing infrastructure.

Despite that record, it would be comforting to fantasize that this time, our elected representatives will be leaders and statesmen, not hacks and demagogues running from fundraising calls to cable news preening. Imagine Mitch McConnell, John McCain, Lindsay Graham and Rand Paul rising to the occasion. Imagine Ted Cruz taking a break from banging his high chair. Imagine John Boehner not the hapless captive of the Louie Gohmert and Steve Kings and Virginia Foxxes, but actually stepping up to the mantle of his Speakership.

I know, I know. That ain't gonna happen. But the next best thing may. It's true that the nation has been disgusted by Congress for a while, but its coming performance in this Syria debate may be so soilingly loathsome that real reform

will get some momentum. Unless we change the way campaign money is raised and spent; unless we make public service a privilege, not an audition for a lobbyist's paycheck; unless district lines and elections aren't rigged, and filibusters aren't routine 'cockblocks' — without a red-hot constituency for overhauling our political system, it'll always be Groundhog Day in Washington.

We may not get a great debate about international norms and national security. It's possible that Congress will neither put up nor shut up.

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