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Two, Three, Many Grover Norquists



By Marty Kaplan

So Grover Norquist turns out to be a colossus with feet of clay.

Norquist, in case you don't watch too much cable news, is the Washington lobbyist who for years has threatened hundreds of conservative candidates with defeat unless they signed a pledge to never, ever vote to raise taxes. Until now, it worked. The massive transfer of wealth to the top 1 percent of Americans is arguably a consequence of his purity test, as is the size of the deficit and the gridlock on the Hill. But since the election, a panicky Norquist has watched one member of Congress after another take off his purity ring. And you know what? No brimstone has hailed down on them. Far from being omnipotent, Grover Norquist turns out to have electile dysfunction.

In fact, many of Washington's mighty now fear not being feared. They're right to tremble, because the jig is up.

The truth is that Mitch McConnell is bluffing. John Boehner is a paper tiger. And Lindsey Graham is wearing no clothes. (Ewww.)

For years, Senate minority leader McConnell's explicit goal has been ensuring President Obama's failure. He's prevented hundreds of bills from coming to a vote — from even being debated at all — by perverting the filibuster's use. It once was a rarity: Lyndon Johnson faced just one filibuster in his six years as majority leader. But in Harry Reid's six years in the same job, he's faced 386.

Now that Democrats are talking about some incremental changes in the filibuster rule — like permitting bills at least to be debated, and requiring filibusters to actually take the floor and talk — McConnell is predicting that “the fighting, the bitterness and the gridlock will only get worse.” It “would poison party relations even more,” he warns, and “would prevent the very possibility of compromise and threaten to make the disputes of the past few years look like pillow fights.” Translation: If Democrats take away my guns, I'm going to get a nuclear bomb. Reality: If Democrats call McConnell's bluff, the country will easily see through his attempt to weasel out of accountability for his own obstructionism.

On the other side of the Hill, House Speaker John Boehner is playing both good cop and bad cop in the budget negotiations. As nice guy, he says he's all about doing what's best for the country. As tough guy, he represents a hundred or so members who say they're willing to see the United States get its credit rating downgraded again, and even default on its debt, rather than compromise on a balance of revenue increases and spending cuts. President Obama nails this for what it is: taking our economy hostage. But Speaker Boehner says that raising the debt ceiling is his “leverage,” that it has to be part of a quid pro quo: “There is a price for everything.”

Two years ago, when the president had a showdown with the hostage-takers, he blinked. If he stands his ground this time, reckless House members will again try to force Boehner to refuse a deal that includes raising taxes on the wealthy. But it's not inevitable that the country will blame both sides equally for intransigence. The president has a bully pulpit. It's not beyond his wit to explain who the real obstructionists are. And as the election demonstrated, it's not beyond the capacity of the American people to see through the propaganda that the right's billionaires — I mean, jobs creators — will no doubt unleash. If Obama

thinks that the only way to strike a budget bargain is to capitulate to the economic terrorists who pull Boehner's strings, then unfairness is already baked into the deal. But 2012 is not 2010. Boehner can see that the Norquist era is ending. He fears the national opprobrium that his suicidal caucus will bring down on themselves and on him. It's that paper tiger — and not some mad beast who must be mollified at all costs — whom I hope the president knows he's negotiating with.

And then there's South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham, who — together with two other GOP Senators, Arizona's John McCain and New Hampshire's Kelly Ayotte — has vowed to put a hold on Susan Rice's nomination to be Secretary of State, if President Obama should nominate her. Now, there's a game of truth-or-dare I hope the president plays.

In the pack mind of Sunday talk show bookers, those senators have stature. But I suspect that in the public's mind, McCain and Graham are increasingly seen as partisan hacks smearing a talented public servant. McCain is a cranky grudge-keeper getting even with Ambassador Rice for being an effective Obama surrogate in 2008; Graham is McCain's mini-me; Ayotte's involvement is a transparent attempt to prevent this from looking like some old white men ganging up on a woman of color. They want to force Obama to abandon Rice, nominate Senator John Kerry instead, and pave the way for a Massachusetts special election that could replace him with Scott Brown, the Republican senator whom Elizabeth Warren just beat. These are not three giants. They're three Grovers. The president should welcome the chance to let them tar themselves with their own brush.

Karl Rove has a glass jaw, too. So do the Koch brothers, and Sheldon Adelson. Did you see how miserably ineffectual their big money was in the election? There are plenty of Grovers out there. If the Democrats have the spine to do it, this is a ripe moment to reveal the impotence of the bullies in the political playground.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and email me there if you'd like.

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