

Paul Krugman - New York Times Blog

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Imaginary Grownups

So the Obama budget is out, Social Security cuts and all. Why is this happening?

Well, it's all about the positioning. Ezra Klein gets at what I hear from the WH too (and what's obvious in any case):

Today's budget is the White House's effort to reach the bedrock of the fiscal debate. Half of its purpose is showing what they're willing to do. They want a budget compromise, and this budget proves it. There are now liberals protesting on the White House lawn. But the other half is revealing what the GOP is — or, more to the point, isn't — willing to do. Republicans don't want a budget compromise, and this budget is likely to prove that, too.

The question is, to whom are these things being “proved”?

Since the beginning, the Obama administration has seemed eager to gain the approval of the grownups — the sensible people who will reward efforts to be Serious, and eventually turn on those nasty, intransigent Republicans as long as Obama and co. don't cater too much to the hippies. This is the latest, biggest version of that strategy. Unfortunately, it will almost surely fail. Why? Because there are no grownups — only people who try to sound like grownups, but are actually every bit as childish as anyone else.

After all, if whoever it is that Obama is trying to appeal to here — I guess it's the Washington Post editorial page and various other self-proclaimed “centrist” pundits — were willing to admit the fundamental asymmetry in our political debate, willing to admit that if DC is broken, it's because of GOP radicalism, they would have done it long ago. It's not as if this reality was hard to see.

But the truth is that the “centrists” aren't sincere. Calls for centrism and bipartisanship aren't actual demands for specific policies — they're an act, a posture these people take to make themselves seem noble and superior. And that posture requires blaming both parties equally, no matter what they do or propose. Obama's budget will garner faint praise at best, quickly followed by denunciations of the president for not supplying the Leadership (TM) to make Republicans compromise — which means that he's just as much at fault as they are, see?

So let's nominate Michael Bloomberg, who will offer the exact same policies but, you know, really mean it (and supply Leadership (TM)).

No, seriously (but not Seriously): who do you think could possibly be persuaded by this budget who hasn't already been persuaded?

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