
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

That was terrible reporting

Press Criticism | By Craig Gurian | Taxes

December 3, 2010 — Sometimes there is just no other way to put it.

Once a year, Maureen Dowd [turns her column over to her brother](#); the device, if tired, is at least duly announced. Today, The New York Times, without disclosure, [apparently turned its lead story over to Republican Party writers](#), with two prominent members of the Times' Washington Bureau giving a pitch-perfect reading of the GOP's "surrender, tax cuts for multi-millionaires are inevitable" script.

It is as though these reporters think that one little league team has been outscored by more than 10 runs, should take advantage of the "mercy rule," forfeit the game, and end the embarrassment as quickly as possible.

In the performance by David Herszenhorn and Jackie Calmes, it turns out that trivial matters like yesterday's vote by the House of Representatives to extend tax cuts broadly are not "real" or worth exploring in and of themselves. And, we learn, there are some Democrats who — perversely — are still making a nuisance of themselves instead of accepting and embracing Republican triumph maturely and demurely.

Perhaps Herszenhorn and Calmes were taking their cue from their colleague David Leonhardt who, just the other day, [explained the facts of life for Democrats](#): "their only choice now is among various versions of retreat."

It is as though these reporters think that one little league team has been outscored by more than 10 runs, should take advantage of the "mercy rule," forfeit the game, and end the embarrassment as quickly as possible.

One difference, perhaps: the article was nominally about the conduct of American government at a moment when a majority of United States Senators, a majority of the members of the House of Representatives, the President, and a majority of the American people all believe that it would in fact be better not to extend tax cuts for multi-millionaires.

Not for the Times today. Yesterday's House vote was merely a "symbolic nod" to President Obama's position that tax cuts for the wealthiest should expire as scheduled at the end of the month. In truth, the House did actually pass legislation on a topic that is surely consequential. Yet there is no exploration of substance.

168 Republicans (and 20 Democrats) in fact voted against tax cuts on the first \$250,000 each family — including each wealthy family — earns. The justification? Richer families' income over and above \$250,000 would not qualify for the lower tax rate. The article, unfortunately, fails to probe to any degree the justification for this position.

Instead, we get only the squabbling meme, with Nancy Pelosi whining that, “This is so grossly unfair,” and John Boehner replying with the manly rebuke that having to vote on legislation was “chicken crap.”

And we get the reporters distancing themselves from the Democratic description of the tax cuts as “middle class” tax cuts. The accuracy or inaccuracy of the characterization is determinable, but the article treats the question of who would get the cuts and who would not as something that exists purely in the world of back-and-forth posturing.

The reporters also draw a misleading picture of the Senate. The House bill may have “no chance of passage in the Senate,” but that’s not because “even some Democrats say the tax cuts should be extended for everyone.” It is most directly because of unanimous Republican opposition to permitting a vote that the Republicans would lose, but the reporters choose not to mention this.

As usual, the number of Democrats comprising “some Democrats” is not defined, but those left out (and left voiceless in the piece) are the overwhelming majority of the Senate Democratic Caucus.

So deeply have the reporters drunk from the “why bother” Kool Aid (votes on legislation that a majority of Senators support are also “symbolic,” by the way), that they don’t describe “posturing by Democrats” as a charge made by Republicans. Instead, the reporting team unselfconsciously presents that characterization as fact, a “fact” that Republicans are bemoaning as “delaying the inevitable.”

Well, truth be told, not inevitable. Despite the recitation of the “drubbing” that Democrats took in the November elections — a drubbing that no one seriously ascribes to a massive uprising in support of tax cuts for the wealthy, nor takes as the genesis of the centrality of tax cuts for the wealthy to Republicans — Democrats still retain significant structural leverage. All year it has been taken as a given in most media reports that it is a waste of time for Democrats to try to achieve most aspects of their agenda because 41 Republicans can use Senate super-majority rules to prevent votes on the merits. Won’t Democrats in January have more than 41 votes? And if there aren’t 41 Democratic Senators prepared to block a vote on tax cuts for the wealthy, isn’t that something to be reported on?

Oh, and isn’t there that veto power thing that a President can invoke?

Won’t Democrats in January have more than 41 votes? And if there aren’t 41 Democratic Senators prepared to block a vote on tax cuts for the wealthy, isn’t that something to be reported on?

It is a disservice to readers when the closest thing to a newspaper of record conflates a choice not to stand up with not having a choice. No natural law of politics prevents Democrats from repeating in January and thereafter: “Your taxes have gone up purely because Republicans thought it was more important to save multi-millionaires hundreds of thousands of dollars each year than to agree to our plan to keep tax cuts in place for you and 98 percent of American households.”

I know I should be done — after all, I’m only treating the 10 paragraphs after the lede — but there is yet more sloppiness to be noted.

The article reports, entirely uncritically, the Republican assertion that Democratic insistence on voting on their proposals was “even getting in the way of a potential deal on aid for millions of unemployed Americans whose benefits have started to run out.” Were the reporters formally prohibited from asking any questions, or did they decide on their own not to ask, “Couldn’t you just agree to extend those benefits whenever you want?”

In describing the unnamed and unnumbered Democrats supporting “temporary” extension (a remarkably meaningless phrase in the absence of any reason to believe that another temporary extensions would not be “inevitable” at the end of 2012), the reporters also uncritically recite the argument being made that each of the wealthiest families needs to get hundreds of thousands of dollars in tax cuts each year “given the continued weakness in the economy.” (OK, you wouldn’t learn the scope of the proposed Republican giveaway from the article.) Mightn’t the reporters at least have referenced the ample evidence pointing to tax cuts for the wealthiest being among the least effective ways to stimulate the economy?

To the reporters, the House bill “holds enormous symbolism for Democrats”; they would have written a very different story if they thought their job bore any relation to connecting congressional action (and inaction) to real world consequences.

This content originally appeared at <http://remappingdebate.org/article/was-terrible-reporting>