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**MESSAGE TO WASHINGTON:
STOP PLAYING CHICKEN WITH THE AMERICAN PEOPLE**

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Threatening to take the nation over the fiscal cliff is playing chicken with the American people. It's the kind of deadly game that teenagers in souped-up cars used to play as a rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. It's unworthy of President Obama and Congress whose sworn duty is defend the Constitution "against all enemies, foreign and *domestic*." At the moment, neither political party is measuring up to that standard. They play chicken because it tells their constituent base that they are uncompromising when it comes to their core principles.

There are many ways around the lines in the sand drawn by President Obama who demands that the rich "pay a little more" and the Republicans who will insist that higher marginal tax rates imposed on the rich is a "jobs killer." However, to avoid taking us over the fiscal cliff they must give up playing chicken and get down to governing instead.

Consider the following 12 suggestions arranged in two sets of six each, one relating to changes in federal tax revenues and the other to changes in federal expenditures. Clearly there are many more options. However, the more options the more opportunities for squabbling and driving the United States over the fiscal cliff. Under the present grave circumstances, iron-clad pledges must be set aside.

Federal Tax Revenues.

- ▶ Tie higher marginal tax rates to the national unemployment rate. The higher tax rates become effective only when the jobless rate falls below, say, 6 percent. The jobless rate was below 6 percent continuously from November 2003 through July 2008.
- ▶ Adjust the income threshold that defines "rich" to the cost of living at the city/regional level. BLS data indicate that in September the cost of living in New York, for example, was 19 percent higher than in Dallas. A threshold of approximately \$297,000 in New York is the equivalent of \$250,000 in Dallas.
- ▶ Eliminate the deduction for mortgage interest payments on a second house for a taxpayer with income above some threshold, say \$1,000,000.
- ▶ Reject all amendments to the tax code that have the effect of reducing the taxes on certain types of income until the actual (not budgeted) deficit has been reduced to some level, say, \$50 billion.

- ▶ Due to repeated cuts in reimbursement for health-care services rendered that reduce their incomes and in effect impose higher taxes, exempt physicians from higher marginal rates provided their practices are open to Medicare and Medicaid patients.
- ▶ Limit tax deductions to some fixed percent or amount of taxpayer income.

Federal Expenditures.

- ▶ Means test Social Security retirement and death benefits. Or means test retirement benefits until a person reaches a higher retirement age, say, 70. Allow benefits thereafter without means testing. Here and in the other instances noted below the means test is defined as income below 100 percent of the official poverty threshold.
- ▶ Require an upfront cash payment of some minimal or nominal amount from anyone getting primary-care services under the Medicaid program.
- ▶ Means test all extended unemployment insurance benefits that are paid by the states from monies supplied by the federal treasury.
- ▶ Eliminate all refundable tax credits except for federal taxpayers with incomes below the poverty level.
- ▶ Impose limits on future bank bailouts, clawing back payments already made above those limits.
- ▶ Reject all amendments to the tax code that have the effect of subsidizing enterprises and organizations including state and local governments until the actual deficit has been reduced to some level, say, \$50 billion.

As an incentive for Washington to stop playing chicken with the American people, escrow all salary payments to the president, vice-president, cabinet secretaries, and members of Congress until a *permanent* solution is found for the fiscal cliff.

America faces a fiscal cliff precisely because some in Washington are threatening to take the entire nation over the cliff if they do not get their way. Some of those feel affirmed by the election returns and defend their position by claiming that elections have consequences. True enough. However, no one in public office, most especially the president, has a right to play chicken with the American people. Quite to the contrary, they have a duty to do everything in their power to preserve the Great American experiment.

The U.S. Constitution was written in order “to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, ... secure the Blessings of Liberty ...” Playing chicken is a violation of the oath of office taken by members of Congress to defend that Constitution against all enemies. It’s time for them to practice that oath or resign so that their seats in Congress can be taken by others who will not subordinate the Constitution to election returns.

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