

Ode To the Informed Public: The 'Fiscal Cliff' Negotiations As a House Fire...

☒ Imagine that you're standing outside on the street, in the bitter cold of the night, dressed in your pajamas. In horror, you're watching your home engulfed in flames. Imagine that the fire fighters have arrived, and with them are all the trucks, hoses, and other equipment required to start attacking the fire.

You know a lot of damage has already been done to your house, but the foundation is solid, many of your belongings can still be saved, and you're certain you can rebuild if the fire is put out in time. The problem is that there are two lead firemen standing in your front yard, arguing over how best to extinguish the flames. While the fire spreads and your house continues to burn, they keep arguing with neither of them giving in an inch. You're forced to watch helplessly as everything you've built up over the years is being destroyed.

This is essentially what's happening right now with the 'fiscal cliff' discussions in Washington, and really with every time-sensitive, partisan battle (including the debt ceiling, annual budgets, etc) that has taken place over the U.S. economy in the past few years. You are the 'informed public' because you see the overall problem, recognize how it affects you, and are expecting the people whose salaries you pay to actually fix the problem. The house on fire is the collapsing state of the economy. The two firemen are our elected leaders from the Democratic and Republican parties. The 'uninformed public' is your next-door neighbor who calmly steps outside of his house to watch the light display.

With a big smile on his face, your neighbor records the fire

on his iPhone, and wonders how long it will take to upload the video to YouTube later. He doesn't really seem to understand the situation, and is oblivious to the very real threat of the large, swirling flames soon jumping from *your* house to *his* house.

Your frustration turns to anger over the inability of the firemen to act professional, formulate a plan, and save your house. You run up to them to try and figure out what their problem is, and are shocked to hear the source of the stalemate. The fireman with the "R" printed on his helmet is proposing to hook up the hoses to fire-hydrants, and douse the flames with large quantities of water. The fireman with the "D" printed on his helmet is proposing to hook up the hoses to gasoline-tankers, and douse the flames with as much gasoline as possible.

You quickly realize that *Fireman D* is either dangerously ignorant or completely insane, but *Fireman R's* lower rank won't let him take control away from Fireman D to resolve the situation. You beg Fireman D to put out the fire with water, but he completely ignores you. Furthermore, your neighbor has now joined the argument and is backing the gasoline idea, purely because he finds Fireman D to be more personable and charming than Fireman R.

Reporters from the media show up and begin covering the fire with their lights and cameras. You run up to them and explain what's going on, and beg them to get the message out that you're going to lose your house because the guy in charge isn't taking the situation seriously. You hope that the media exposure will pressure Fireman D into doing the right thing. To your shock, however, you find that the media is on Fireman D's side. They broadcast live on the evening news that Fireman R is "obstructing" Fireman D from doing his job, and a house is going to be completely destroyed because of it.

You shout at the reporters in frustration, but they tell you

you're "just angry", and suggest that your anger is "racially motivated".

"What???" you scream out in utter disbelief.

The reporters point out that Fireman D is an African American – a fact that is completely irrelevant to you. While you insist that you're not a racist, and just want someone to save your house, the reporters skeptically roll their eyes, snicker, and whisper something among themselves about "dog whistles".

Your neighbor asks you why you don't want Fireman D to put out the fire, and you explain to him that a fire can't be put out with gasoline.

"Have you ever *tried* to put out a fire with gasoline?" he asks.

"Of course not!" you scream.

"Well then how do you know it won't work?"

You grab onto your hair and shout, "Because it's gasoline! It's flammable!"

"Flammable?" asks one of the reporters with a snide expression on his face. "Where did you hear such a stupid thing? FOX News?" All of the reporters laugh.

"It's common knowledge! It's common sense!" you wail.

At that point, you notice that your neighbor's house is now on fire as well, and you yell at him to turn around and see it. But he won't. He just looks at you like you're talking in a foreign language.

"There's nothing to be worried about, man," he says. "Fireman D says that he's 'looking out for me'. It's all good!" He then turns his attention back to his iPhone, and starts playing

video games on it.

"Listen..." begins Fireman D as he puts his arm around your shoulder. "I've been trying to compromise with the other fireman. I told him that while we're pumping gasoline through the hoses, he can use a squirt gun to try and fight the fire with water. It's a *balanced* approach."

"That sounds fair," quickly says a reporter.

"Yes, *more* than fair," says another one.

"I'm all about compromise," says Fireman D before he smiles and poses next to you for a quick picture from the press. "But the other guy is being completely unreasonable. He must *want* the fire to destroy this house. What's with this guy's obsession with water, anyway? He's probably in bed with *Big H2O!*"

The reporters laugh. Some even applaud. Your eyes are glazed over in disbelief.

Fireman D continues, "You see...In the past, we've tried it Fireman R's way and it didn't work! We've been using water to put fires out for a long time, and yet buildings still burn down! So his plan doesn't work!"

At your whits end, you say, "Sir... I know that burning buildings can't always be saved with water, but it's the best chance we have. Gasoline won't work! Gasoline will only make the problem worse! Please help me! I built that house with my own two hands!"

This seems to offend Fireman D, who raises his voice and condescendingly states, "You *didn't* build that! Somebody else made that happen!"

Minutes later, your house has been completely burnt to the ground and your neighbor's house with it. Your neighbor's still playing video games, unaware of anything happening

around him. The media is circled around Fireman R, angrily blaming *him* for the destruction, and citing his hardline, unreasonable demands as the cause. Fireman D is on his cellphone, coordinating plans for an upcoming Hawaiian vacation. You are sitting on the sidewalk, alone, with your face in your hands, wondering if the whole world has gone completely nuts.

And...scene.