The Crazy Uncle Party
Jim Mahon

WILLIAMSTOWN

Once upon a time, Republicans proudly called theirs the "Daddy Party." They liked being seen as the protector, the payroll-maker, the disciplinarian, the traditional breadwinner, the one who carried the country on broad shoulders. Of course, this made Democrats the "Mommy Party," with everything that was supposed to imply.

Those days are over. The Republicans are now your crazy uncle.

You know who I'm talking about. He gets into a lot of fights. Loves to tell scary stories. Thinks the government can find us through our tooth fillings. Has a spiritual life that cycles from vitamins to booze to Jesus and back. His favorite pastime is going out back with a six-pack of Bud to shoot at Grandpa's old Studebaker.

Now look at the GOP nowadays. "Death panels." Forged birth certificates. "Second-Amendment remedies." Bomb Iran. In a poll last summer, most Republican respondents said that President Obama wants to impose Islamic law. The Tea Party is starting to look like the one Alice had in Wonderland.

You might wonder why you didn't notice this before now. I think it's about great message discipline. Republican opinion leaders and politicians say the same things at the same time. You end up thinking, "I must be the nutty one. Maybe the president is a socialist Muslim Kenyan anti-colonialist. Maybe all those scientists did conspire to invent global warming. Maybe big tax cuts for wealthy people do increase government revenue."

If a big enough group of people says the earth is flat, you figure you must be missing something. Especially if they have their own TV network.

The GOP Congressional bloc is remarkably unified, too. As the political scientist John Holbo and others have pointed out, if one party has total discipline and the other one doesn't, the disciplined party always gets to be the "bipartisan" one. They just wait for one of the freethinkers on the other side to cross over. Meanwhile, the undisciplined party can't do anything but "partisan" things because the other guys never switch sides. They might be bonkers, but they're united.

You know what happens next: a serious old TV guy helpfully warns people in the undisciplined party to stop being so partisan. But how can you meet somebody halfway on whether or not the president is a Muslim? Or about whether or not your party is harboring sworn enemies of the country?

Here's the other thing. When the GOP went crazy uncle, a lot of Democrats in Washington turned into his battered wife. You've seen this, too. He insults the neighbors, she calls them the next day to apologize. He makes a big mess, she cleans it up.

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Is there a method to his madness? There used to be. The Republican leadership (i.e., Senator Limbaugh) has always known that the core philosophy of the party - tax cuts for the wealthy, spending cuts for the rest - doesn't poll very well. So for the last two decades or so, leaders have promoted a culture war to excite their base, especially at off-year elections when turnout will be low. It worked last November, all too well. They brought a bunch of people to Congress who actually believe the nutty stuff.
Now, it's one thing to talk crazy, another thing to govern crazy. Here's their problem. Although they face a president whose dominant political impulse is to conciliate, a guy who adopted some of their old favorite ideas (the individual health insurance mandate, cap-and-trade), they can't be seen to compromise with somebody they've demonized for so long. So they're trying to have it both ways - obtaining the substance their core constituency wants (lower taxes for well-connected businesses and the wealthy) while adopting the inflexible posture the True Believers demand.

Hence their position on raising the debt ceiling. In effect, the Republican leadership has said it will break the government and ruin the economy unless Democrats do exactly as it wants. Even though federal revenues are at their lowest point in decades (relative to the size of the economy), they refuse even to close a few tax loopholes in exchange for massive spending cuts. And never mind raising tax rates on the highest incomes to Clinton-era levels - in their book, that's a form of socialism.

In the past, moderates in the party went along with this kind of thing because, appropriately deployed, it proved effective as a bargaining tactic. But the GOP rank and file has now spent years totally immersed in the same talk-radio-Fox-News narrative about the evils of Democrats, the president, and government itself. The moderates don't hold the reins anymore. If only to spite us smug know-it-all liberals, the Tea Party is ready to drive the country over a cliff.

Just like when your crazy uncle threatened to burn down the house with everybody in it. Except that he got arrested.

Jim Mahon is a Democrat and a professor of political science at Williams College.

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