

**Over the Cliff and Back Again:  
Brinksmanship and Statesmanship**

For almost an entire day, New Year's Day, there we all were – suspended in air having watched the inaction of Congress drive our nation over the dreaded fiscal cliff. Tax increases on everyone were scheduled to kick in immediately along with spending cuts to federal programs. Federal education programs and every other sector of our economy supported by federal funding, from defense to social services, had been prepared to fear the disastrous consequences of the going over this fiscal cliff. Of course, after the ball dropped at midnight we were all pulled back from doom through a New Year's Day vote by a coalition of Democrats and Republicans in the House of Representatives on a measure that increased taxes but delayed the debt crisis for two months. Yet there we were suspended in mid-air. How and why did we get there and why are some referring to this type of emergency as, "the new normal."

The answer to this question lies in a new way of doing politics ushered in a little over four years ago by the election of President Obama. It first came to my attention in November 2008 shortly after Obama's election when [Rahm Emmanuel](#), the President's new chief of staff, said about the then recent economic collapse, "You never want a serious crisis to go to waste. And what I mean by that is an opportunity to do things you think you could not do before."

More and more we find that thorny political situations which once required the skills of a statesman, "a wise, skillful, and respected political leader," now bring to the fore individuals expert in brinksmanship, "the art or practice of pushing a dangerous situation or confrontation to the limit of safety especially to force a desired outcome?" (Merriam-Webster Online).

Over the past four years those skilled in brinksmanship have become our most powerful political leaders. They not only take advantage of crises forced upon them but also encourage the development of artificial crises by deferring action on matters until a situation that could have been resolved easily has evolved though inaction into a crisis. This is clearly what occurred with the fiscal cliff. The situation which spilled over this month was created though the process called sequestration that President Obama and House and Senate leaders created over a year ago to deal with our nation's debt crises. In short they took a very bad debt situation and allowed it to fester for an additional year, creating a situation so dire that they knew congress would be forced to act to resolve it. More incredibly, they really did not solve the debt crises with their New Year's Day action but only delayed it for two months. Advocates for higher taxes were able to use the January manufactured crises to achieve tax increases that they would not have been about to achieve through other means. Who knows what they will accomplish at the end of February when the next manufactured crises looms?

This new way of doing politics by delaying decisions has also shaped public education. It used to be that every six years the Congress would reauthorize the federal *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA); re-enacting sections that seemed to be working well, deleting

sections that no longer served a useful purpose and adding new provisions as deemed necessary. However ESEA, currently called the *No Child Left Behind Act*, was scheduled to be reauthorized when President Obama took office four years ago, and this has not occurred. Instead the U.S. Department of Education under Arne Duncan, Obama's appointed Secretary of Education, has offered school districts and states waivers to outdated sections of the law if they comply with regulations developed by the Department. This has been a way for the administration to, "to do things that you could not do before." So we now see states and school districts competing for "Race to the Top" funding through a competitive grant process never authorized by Congress. For example it was recently [reported](#) that California was denied a waiver to NCLB because the US Department of Education did not approve of their teacher evaluation system.

The legislative process has never been a pretty sight; some have likened it to making sausage, something you never want to see being done but providing a satisfactory product. But this new way of doing politics isn't just unsightly; it is unconscionable because it places the future of our nation in ever increasing jeopardy. As Congressman Louie Gohmert of Texas said on New Year's Day, "I'm embarrassed for this generation. Future generations deserve better." Proverbs 13 suggests that it is wrong to not leave an inheritance for our children: "*A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children, but the sinner's wealth is laid up for the righteous;*" and Proverbs 22 warns against piling up debt:

*"Be not one of those who give pledges, who put up security for debts.*

*If you have nothing with which to pay, why should your bed be taken from under you?"*

Now I may be off base here – perhaps the artificial urgency of manufactured crises is necessary to move a deadlocked Congress forward – but the prudent course of action would seem to be to heed these Biblical warnings and reign in our out of control federal government. The future of our children and our nation may depend on this. However, I am certain that the nation that does not consider God's precepts is bound to stumble. Keep our nation's leaders in your prayers as we move forward into this New Year. The blessings of our Lord are more valuable than riches or gold.

If you have thoughts or comments on this issue or other federal education issues please share them with us. You can address your thoughts and comments to [JMitchell@ceai.org](mailto:JMitchell@ceai.org).

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Washington Education Watch 01/2013

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