



Mitchell's Musings 10-7-13: Grow Up

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This week's Mitchell's Musings was going to deal with another topic but given the current Congressional stalemate over the budget/government shutdown and the debt ceiling, it is necessary to focus on that debacle. I have in past musings talked about negotiations and negotiating strategy, particularly lessons learned from the world of collective bargaining that might be applied to political conflicts. While there are definite insights about negotiating and impasses that can illuminate the current conflict, there is a more fundamental question of why we find ourselves in the current stalemate.

It goes without saying that the Congressional conflict has the potential to damage the slow recovery from the Great Recession, should it persist for an extended period. How much damage? It is hard to say – which is precisely the point. No one can forecast what the consequence would be, other than saying the longer the government shutdown continues, the greater the likelihood of damage.

The debt ceiling – if it is hit (supposedly by the middle of this month) – and if it leads to default on U.S. Treasury security debt service – raises other kinds of risk in financial markets. The potential for financial gyrations to do harm was seen clearly in 2008. Who wants to risk that kind of event again? You might believe that the damage wouldn't be great. But do you believe it with 100% certainty. Ninety percent? Eighty? Unless you are 100% sure, you are risking potentially great harm with a 10% chance of happening or maybe a 20% chance. In the real world, people take out insurance and pay considerable premiums to offset small risks of catastrophic events.

Some readers may recall the commentary on the 1963 March on Washington by Jean Shepherd I put on YouTube (and on the EPRN website). Shepherd was a humorist who was on WOR radio in New York City from the 1950s into the 1970s, most often in the late evening but sometimes at other hours. If you Google his name, you will find websites devoted to his programming and background.¹ However, one of his broadcasts, which probably aired in the mid-to-late 1960s, is surprisingly instructive about the political and policy world of 2013. You can find it on YouTube at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EOR8OKtJd0s>.

At the time of the broadcast, the first baby boomers were aging into early chronological adulthood. However, Shepherd describes them as wanting adult privileges, even as teenagers, but without adult responsibilities. He also describes somewhat older people at the time as mirroring baby boomer behavior. By adulthood, he did not mean such conventional behaviors as buying a house and taking out a mortgage. Shepherd refers instead to a much more general role. He described adulthood as taking responsibility for running the world and providing a certain stability to society.

The childish behavior of both adults of the period and teens who wanted to have what they viewed as adult rights was, in Shepherd's view based on a lack of perspective. Children tend to be self-centered

¹ Archive.org has many hours of his broadcasts that can be played or downloaded.

and view the world as either run for their benefit or believe that it should be. When they don't get their way, they throw tantrums.

Shepherd noted that when it comes to political matters, childish adults tend to view the world from what he termed a "didactic" framework, black or white. There is no understanding or tolerance for social complexity. There is only good and evil. There is little self awareness of personal complexity, as well, among childish adults. So there is no appreciation for the complexities of others.

In short, the Shepherd broadcast suggests that the seeds of the current impasse in Congress were already visible in the mid-to-late 1960s. If so, the causes – whatever they were – are more deeply embedded in the national fabric than more recent events such as the Great Recession or even the growth income inequality (which debuts about a decade later). Of course, current conditions can aggravate an underlying disease. But that fact means that if even if the symptoms recede for a time – say in the current instance through some kind of deal on the budget and debt ceiling – the disease will remain. Of course, some diseases can be cured. But the patient typically must be adult enough to take his or her medicine, even if it is bitter and unpleasant. No such maturity is evident at present.