

A Republican Thanksgiving: We're the turkeys

THERE'S no limit to the amount of mischief wolves can get into when left alone in the henhouse. Wolves, you see, eat hens and chickens. They can't help themselves. Likewise, we shouldn't be surprised at the damage anti-government Republicans can cause when left in charge of all branches of government. They just can't help themselves.

Take Thanksgiving. Along with Christmas, it's one of the few days of the year when Americans seem genuinely concerned about hunger and what poor people eat. So we pony up a few bucks to local food pantries so we can eat our own gluttonous feasts in peace and feel good the next morning while looking at obligatory news photos of humiliated poor folks queuing for hot meals. Then we head off to begin the "shopping season," loading up on sweatshop booty. But most Americans at least go through the motions of acting as though we actually care.

Then there are the Republicans in the U.S. Congress. You have to admire their sheer gall. Aided by most of their Democratic colleagues, they marked the Thanksgiving season by voting themselves a \$3,100 pay raise, bringing the average congressional paycheck up to \$165,200 per year. This was the "bipartisan" moment. This largess follows on the tail of their Republican colleagues in the Senate voting themselves, and the other 14 million people comprising America's richest classes, a fat new \$60 billion tax cut. This on top of the previous Bush tax cuts that, along with the astronomical costs of the Iraq war, have plunged the federal government into virtual bankruptcy.

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As has been the case since 1980 when George Bush Senior labeled Ronald Reagan's fiscal policies "voodoo economics," the math simply doesn't add up. This was apparent even to the Congressional Republicans who, as a last-minute Thanksgiving gesture of "fiscal responsibility," voted to slash Medicaid, food stamps, college loans, foster care, and a host of other programs comprising some of the last vestiges of our disappearing social safety net. I guess this leaves us especially thankful for what little we have left. So Happy Thanksgiving.

In budgetary terms, radical as these cuts in social programs may be, the whole budget-cutting bill still falls around \$10 billion short of paying for the tax breaks for the rich. Hence, this round of "fiscal responsibility" lands the feds deeper in debt while undermining American values and further contributing to the moral impoverishment of the nation.

Put in human terms, the Congressional cut in food stamps translates into 235,000 more people losing their benefits. Most of these folks, according to The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, are working families with children – no doubt working in new economy McJobs. I guess this might be good news for a few turkeys, but awful news for a whole bunch of human families. The ensuing \$700 million "savings" will pay for less than one percent of the Senate's tax cut package, while, according to Reuters, removing food stamp recipients from school lunch programs and making legal immigrants wait seven years before becoming eligible for food stamps (currently they have to wait "only" five years). Another 330,000 families will lose their ability to access federally funded day-care programs, crippling the ability of many single parents to work their way out of poverty. Seventy thousand people will lose their ability to access health care. College students and their families, according to The Philadelphia Enquirer, will face \$8 billion in new charges and debts.

Congressman Chris Cannon (R-Utah) has a PR-friendly solution to hunger: Feed America Thursday, a new holiday that asks Americans to skip two meals and give the savings to charity.

Meanwhile, the suits in both the Congress and Senate created a new holiday, to be called, "Feed America Thursday," (FAT). Republican Representative Chris Cannon, one of the sponsors of the bill creating FAT, explains on his website, that "America has been battered in recent months by hurricanes and other natural disasters. There are 33 million Americans, including 13 million children, who live in households that do not have enough to eat." And they're about to be battered by the Republican Thanksgiving Massacre of social programs as well. Cannon's solution is FAT, a holiday calling on Americans to "skip two meals on the Thursday before Thanksgiving, and to donate the money saved to feed America's hungry." Really, I don't make this stuff up.

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So let's get back to that congressional raise. The normal rule of thumb on raises is that you get them for a job well done. By contrast, if you are incompetent, have your finger in the cookie jar, if you are brazenly looting from your employer, or if you are a sadist who openly shows contempt for the customers, you lose your job. Our Representatives in Congress, for the most part, fall into at least one of these latter categories.

For example, if we take them on their word regarding why we invaded Iraq, they're incompetent; over 100,000 people are dead and the U.S. is an outlaw pariah nation because our members of Congress actually believed they could win at Three Card Monty. More likely they were the shills playing the crowd. In any event, they couldn't figure out what millions of people protesting in the streets knew, and what every alternative journalist was documenting at the time – that we were being led into war by a cabal of radicals that, for years, has been writing that we need to invade Iraq and control their oil. Yeah, Congress deserves a raise.

None of this, however, is quite a done deal yet. When they return from their Thanksgiving recesses, the Congress and the Senate will be bickering over the budget bills that cut taxes and social programs. It seems that the House Republican leadership is unhappy with the Senate bill's taxation of oil companies, and that George W. Bush has threatened to veto the bill unless proposed taxes on record breaking oil industry profits are cut. The Senate also wants to savage social programs slightly less than the Congress, but on the other hand, they want to hand the Alaskan National Wildlife Refuge over to oil companies. This is what debate has been reduced to in Washington. One faction wants to cut taxes on oil companies while the other wants to give them pillage rights to our last preserved wilderness areas.

See what happens when you don't vote and you don't protest? Your holidays are ruined.