Substantial Disruption

Irma's Lesson for the Debt Limit Debate

By Mike Tully

Kick 'em when they're up
Kick 'em when they're down
Kick 'em when they're up
Kick 'em all around
- Don Henley, 1982

They came, they saw, and they wound up talking about themselves. Irma was the storm to exhaust all superlatives, the biggest, strongest, baddest hurricane ever, that threatened to rip through the center of Florida with killer winds and a devastating surge. Irma was a huge Category 5 storm, larger than any storm in memory, bigger than the notorious Andrew, a wow factor from space that drew an invasion of satellite trucks, camera operators, engineers, and on-camera talent. Irma seemed poised to retain Category 5 status through landfall and the dreaded storm surge was predicted to hit 15 feet, maybe more with high tide. "Old Testament ... real wrath of God type stuff."

Then, a funny thing happened on the way to the Sunshine State. Irma took a pratfall over Cuba and never regained her strength. Instead of heading directly for Miami, the storm wandered off toward the gulf coast side of the peninsula and gradually weakened. The anticipated killer winds and devastating surge didn't happen and, although there was substantial flooding and millions without power, the feared catastrophic damage and loss of life never occurred. While that was good news, the reality is that bad news attracts more clicks and eyeballs because viewers prefer dirty laundry. "People love it when you lose."

What of the trucks, operators, anchors and producers, millions of dollars of media assets marshalled for what turned out to be a really bad storm, but not quite an Armageddon? They started back-pedaling. NBC's Bill Karins, who seemed slightly embarrassed at the lack of a catastrophe, gamely observed that millions of people had lost or would lose power, even though the dynamic (and visually grabbing) killer surge didn't occur. Many of the networks, even the Weather Channel, resorted to airing reruns of correspondents battling to stay upright in hurricane-force winds. That became the theme of the evening coverage: here's our correspondent hours earlier fighting to stand up against strong winds. Here is another. And another. It was less Dispatch from the Apocalypse than "how I spent my Florida weekend." One of the networks contacted a resident of Key West, who bravely remained on the island during Irma's onslaught, and asked him to describe the devastation. "People are out walking their dogs," he replied. This is not to minimize the widespread losses and suffering that so many people are experiencing – just observing that it was expected to be worse. Meanwhile, three times as many people died in an earthquake in Mexico as perished from Irma's wrath. You can read about it on page A9, next to the "Shelves that Slide" ad.

Now for a thought experiment. Imagine the networks spent millions to relocate their satellite trucks and personnel, but there was no Irma. Instead of winds and flooding the weekend dispatches consisted of wall-to-wall coverage of a nice summer day. That would be totally irrational right, much ado about not much at all? It you can appreciate the absurdity of that scenario then you have an idea of how stupid it is to fight over the national debt limit.

The debt limit is not a Constitutional provision. It was created by an act of Congress in 1917. It is not an appropriation but a mechanism for paying off appropriations. That's also why it has become a political hacky sack in an era of growing national debt. Hold the line on the debt limit, goes the argument, and you suppress spending and start to pay down the debt. The flaw in that theory is the limit only applies to borrowing, not spending, and application of the theory in practice would result in a national default with disastrous economic consequences, kicking those who are up as well as those who are down. For politicians who doubt such an outcome, go ahead and default on your own personal debt and see what happens. No takers?

When political impasse threatened to lead to a default on the debt during the Obama presidency, some observers pointed to language in the Fourteenth Amendment that reads, "The validity of the public debt of the United States ... shall not be questioned." But that language, standing alone, does not necessarily authorize the President to issue debt to cover Congressional appropriations. The authorizing language is contained in Article 2, Section 3 of the Constitution, which says the President "shall take care that the laws be faithfully executed," including laws that require spending. To argue the President is barred from faithfully executing the law when it requires increasing the debt limit is an illogical read of the Constitution. The President doesn't need congressional approval.

Many progressives have argued this point in the past, most recently during Obama-era debt ceiling battles, and Donald Trump apparently agrees with them. While many commentators have profound issues with much of what the President has done and proposes to do, even The Donald recognizes a fake storm when he sees one.

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