

No Time to Fool Around

By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – January 13, 2013

When we struggle as a nation to find common ground – or even respectful dialog – on anything, the last thing we need is exaggeration and deliberately inflammatory language in discussing the events of the day. We'll always have that from some of the general public, but I expect better from our newspapers. That's why I was disappointed with this newspaper's editorial board for their "Our Thoughts" piece in last Sunday's Covington News titled "Fooled Again."

Criticizing the "fiscal cliff deal" passed by Congress, the editorial referred to the expiration of temporary payroll tax cuts as having money "swiped from your pocket." The editors also suggested representatives in Congress are "clearly taking care of themselves" with that action. Now, I agree, there are plenty of circumstances where such behavior is blatantly evident, but this was not one. I'll also concur wholeheartedly the self-inflicted fiscal cliff drama was a shameful display of how broken our government is. But, when viewed calmly and rationally, the payroll tax increase makes logical sense. Painful, yes, but appropriate when you consider the facts.

Temporarily lowering employee FICA contributions from 6.2% to 4.2% was included as a one-year action by the Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010. The reduction was extended by Congress for another year at the end of 2011. The important points being that 1) the reduction was deliberately temporary and 2) FICA contributions go to Social Security and Medicare. We need look no further than the 2012 Presidential election to see how little tolerance American voters have for reducing benefits from these programs. If the American people say preserving the benefits is a top priority, then common sense says place the same priority on revenue streams funding these programs.

In "Fooled Again," the editorial board suggested the economy inside the DC beltway is a "fairytale world" vastly different from where we live down here in Newton County. This conclusion was based on observing a crowded shopping mall near the Pentagon on a Sunday afternoon. Maybe they don't get out much around here, but I spent the better part of the Saturday before Christmas stuck in traffic, trying to negotiate my way to the electronics store across from Stonecrest Mall in Lithonia. It took me 20-30 minutes just get from the exit ramp across I-20, and another 20 minutes to make it into the store's parking lot. People were parked in every spot out front, on the sides, and even behind every store. Inside, the checkout line wrapped from the front to the back of the store.

We also know in modern America the money people spend tells us little about how much money they actually have. Visa, Mastercard, Discover, and American Express had big Christmases in Washington and in Newton County.

People are unemployed in Washington, DC too. Though DC closed 2012 in better shape than Newton County – 8.2% to 9.5% unemployed – both were worse than the national average of 7.4%. And, a search of the National Homeless Shelter Registry lists 88 shelters operating in the greater Washington, DC area.

The narrative of greedy politicians living in fantasyland, cut off from “real America,” lining their pockets at our expense, plays well. And, again, I’m not saying the shoe doesn’t often fit. But, the News missed the mark this time. It’s a problem when we get so caught up in our emotions, that we lose the ability to rationally consider, report, and discuss important events of our time. We paint every situation with the same broad brush, but nothing useful is gleaned.

If anything, the narrative I’m more likely to buy questions why the temporary tax relief was initiated curiously before the 2010 mid-term elections and conveniently retired after the 2012 Presidential election. With objectivity, one might come to realize it’s not the things we gain or lose, but rather the manipulative way in which they are gifted out that should cause concern.

The gap hurting us is not between life in Washington and life in the rest of America. The gap that kills is between our conflicting goals as a nation to reduce the deficit while preserving life as we know it. Sooner or later, something must give. Congress is paralyzed because the people can’t agree on where to give. Politically timed, temporary tax relief is not the answer.

With less hyperbole and more bi-partisan objectivity, the editors of this newspaper – and each one of us – can promote practical understanding of and approaches to the challenges confronting us.

That is the leadership we need.

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