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The Rice Controversy: Lessons for Avoiding the Cliff

By Lanny J. Davis and Michael S. Steele

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lanny-davis/the-rice-controversy-less_b_2330456.html

While we are from different parties and political philosophies, we agree that Susan Rice was treated unfairly by the media, disrespected by Republican senators, and virtually abandoned by the White House.

Yet, there are a few valuable lessons to be gleaned from the Rice affair that both the President and the Congress can apply to avoid going over the “fiscal cliff” on January 1, 2013.

The first lesson is the need to focus on facts and not to confuse them with innuendo and partisan attacks. For example, the indisputable fact is that Ambassador Rice, appearing on behalf of the Secretary of State, delivered almost verbatim the talking points given to her by the CIA, including her use of the expression “spontaneous demonstration” associated with the anti-Muslim video demonstrations in Cairo. Still, some Republican senators blamed her rather than the CIA and the media did very little to correct the record based on the facts.

The second lesson is the need for presidential leadership. The president admirably and publicly defended Ambassador Rice – challenging Republicans to go after him instead of her. But then his White House was strangely passive when it came to correcting the misstatements about Ambassador Rice’s role and the source of those talking points. Speculation about a potential nomination of Ambassador Rice for Secretary of State was allowed to further distort the Ambassador’s role. The president should have just as publicly set the record straight and had his White House press operation backup his assertions.

Third, the issue of fundamental fairness – which resonates with most Americans, regardless of party – should have been the dominant theme in defending the ambassador. For example, the suggestion that Ambassador Rice was “soft” on Rwanda President Paul Kagame because she worked for a company that years ago sold software products and provided advice to Kagame’s government was patently unfair. So was the suggestion that somehow she was responsible for the violence against our embassy in Benghazi because two embassies were attacked by al Qaeda in 1998 when she served as an assistant secretary of state for African Affairs.

So facts, presidential leadership, and fairness should have been applied in the matter of Ambassador Rice and must be applied to the critical issue of avoiding the fiscal cliff.

First, the facts have all but been forgotten as the two sides argue over whether there should be more taxes or more spending cuts and entitlement reform. But the most important fact is at the core of the bi-partisan Simpson-Bowles Commission report: America has to have all three to get the job done or America will drown in debt and risks becoming another Greece.

Second, while the president may want to blame much of the stalemate on Republican ideological rigidity, especially in the House, he could still demonstrate leadership by acknowledging that just raising tax revenues on incomes over \$250,000 per year won't seriously dent the \$16 trillion debt. Moreover, if the president unilaterally endorsed Simpson-Bowles, which relies on closing tax loopholes to raise revenues, and then challenged the Republicans to join him in that endorsement, he not only would avert falling off the fiscal cliff but would be the catalyst for building the kind of consensus around big ideas expected of presidents.

And finally, the president needs to frame the whole fiscal cliff debate in the context of fairness: not just touting an increase in taxes on the wealthy in order to "pay their fair share", but the need to pay down the national debt in fairness to our children and grand-children instead of continuing the immoral act of passing along our credit card receipts for them to pay.

In his 1961 inaugural address, President Kennedy famously challenged all Americans, not just the wealthy, to "Ask not what the country can do for you – ask what you can do for your country."

By presenting the facts, showing leadership, and demanding fairness, the president and responsible GOP leaders can come together – as presidents and congresses have in the past for our generation – to lessen the financial burden on future generations and to ask everyone to share in the responsibility of putting the national interest first. It is not only the right public policy and ultimately smart politics for both parties in congress and the White House, it is the right thing to do.

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Mr. Davis, former special counsel to President Clinton, is a Democratic contributor for Fox News Channel. Mr. Steele, former chairman of the Republican National Committee, is a Republican political analyst for MSNBC. Both are partners in a public affairs/strategic communication firm, "Purple Nation Solutions."

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