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National Greatness Agenda

By **DAVID BROOKS**

Elections come and go, but the United States is still careening toward bankruptcy. By 2020, the U.S. will be spending \$1 trillion a year just to pay the interest on the national debt. Sometime between now and then the catastrophe will come.

It will come with amazing swiftness. The bond markets are with you until the second they are against you. When the psychology shifts and the fiscal crisis happens, the shock will be grievous: national humiliation, diminished power in the world, drastic cuts and spreading pain.

Nothing in this past election has averted this disaster. The Republicans talk about cutting deficits, but a party that campaigns to restore the \$400 billion in Medicare cuts included in the health care law is not serious about averting a fiscal meltdown. Some Democrats, meanwhile, don't even bother to pretend. Look at the way many Democrats completely rejected the draft proposal unveiled by the chairmen of the fiscal commission. Nancy Pelosi, the public sector unions and many liberal commentators are not only unwilling to compromise to prevent a catastrophe, they're unwilling to even consider a compromise. They seem to regard anybody who would negotiate as fundamentally immoral and unserious.

The report from the chairmen lists some of the best ways to raise revenue and cut spending. But it comes with no enactment strategy. In this climate, asking politicians to end the mortgage deduction *and* tax employer health care plans *and* raise capital gains taxes *and* cut benefits for affluent seniors is like asking them to jump on a buzzing sack full of live grenades. They won't do it.

So we continue on the headlong path toward a national disaster. And along the way our dysfunctional political system will leave all sorts of other problems unaddressed: immigration, energy policy and on and on.

Yet, I'm optimistic right now. I'm optimistic because while our political system is a mess, the economic and social values of the country remain sound. My optimism is also based on the conviction that serious, vibrant societies don't sit by and do nothing as their governments drive off a cliff.

Over the past few years, we have seen millions of people mobilize — some behind President Obama and others around the Tea Parties. The country is restive and looking for alternatives. And before the next round of voting begins, I suspect we will see another mass movement: a movement of people who don't feel represented by either of the partisan orthodoxies; a movement of people who want to fundamentally change the norms, institutions and rigidities that cause our gridlock and threaten our country.

You can't organize a movement like this around pain — around tax increases and spending cuts. But you can organize one around a broad revitalization agenda, and, above all, love of country.

It will take a revived patriotism to motivate Americans to do what needs to be done. It will take a revived patriotism to lift people out of their partisan cliques. How can you love your country if you hate the other half of it?

It will take a revived patriotism to get people to look beyond their short-term financial interest to see the long-term national threat. Do you really love your tax deduction more than America's future greatness? Are you really unwilling to sacrifice your Social Security cost-of-living adjustment at a time when soldiers and Marines are sacrificing their lives for their country in Afghanistan?

Like the civil rights movement, this movement will ask Americans to live up to their best selves. But it will do other things besides.

It will have to restore the social norms that prevailed through much of American history: when narcissism and hyperpartisanship was mitigated by loyalties larger than tribe and self; when competition between the parties was limited and constructive, not total and fratricidal.

This movement will have to build institutions to support the leaders who make the hard bargains. As in the civil rights era, politicians won't make big changes unless they are impelled and protected by a social upsurge.

Most important, this movement will have to develop a governing philosophy and a policy agenda. Right now, orthodox liberals and conservatives have their idea networks, and everybody else is intellectual roadkill. This coming movement will have to revive the American System: a governing philosophy that believes in targeted federal efforts to arouse growth, social mobility and responsibility.

Like the chairmen's report, this movement could demand that Congress wipe out tax loopholes and begin anew. It could protect federal aid to the poor while reducing federal subsidies to the upper-middle class.

The coming movement may be a third party or it may support serious people in the existing two. Its goal will be unapologetic: preserving American pre-eminence. It will preserve America's standing in the world on the grounds that this supremacy is a gift to our children and a blessing for the earth.