

Perhaps the tea party fever will finally break

By McClATCHY-TRIBUNE
NEWS SERVICE

The following editorial appeared in the San Jose Mercury News on Tuesday, Oct. 15:

It's crunchtime. If all goes well — and it's still anyone's guess whether it will — negotiators in Washington will soon finalize the details of a deal to reopen the government and avoid a potentially cataclysmic debt default. The American people should be able to breathe a sigh of relief that a few dozen lawmakers could not, in the end, cause an economic crisis by demanding political concessions they were unable to win in the last election.

They have nonetheless caused immense damage. Consumer confidence has plummeted. Businesses around national parks are devastated. Thousands of preschoolers are at home instead of in school. And hundreds of thousands of federal workers are idle instead of doing essential work — the little things, like preventing people from succumbing to food poisoning.

GUEST EDITORIAL

And for what? The deal taking shape, which appears to have no significant concessions to Republican wishes, is no different from what could have been made weeks ago, before tea partyers in the House of Representatives demanded that Speaker John Boehner take the country hostage. Obamacare isn't going to be defunded. The Keystone pipeline, isn't going to be built. Mitt Romney's economic plan isn't going to be enacted.

What a waste all of this has been.

Reasonable Republicans are, at last, beginning to see just how damaging the reactionary tea party wing has become, to both their party and the nation. Several news outlets reported last week that moderate GOP members — or apostates, depending on your point of view — are considering primary challenges to tea party lawmakers. That's a welcome development.

It signals what might be the lone bright spot in the completely unnecessary disaster the GOP has brought on the nation: what President Barack Obama has often called “breaking the fever” of the hard right.

This rump faction of the GOP — motivated largely, it seems, by hatred of Obama and all he stands for — is what's preventing a “grand bargain” on fiscal policy. Obama's most recent budget proposal offers reforms to entitlement programs alongside modest increases in revenue, the kind of deal numerous fiscal commissions have recommended. But the hard right won't accept any tax increases — or, truly, anything at all that has Obama's imprimatur.

Republican party leaders in the Senate, motivated by polls showing the vast majority of the public loathes their actions, are now scurrying to try to reopen the government and raise the debt ceiling. They know that the insanity of their right flank has been exposed, and they're hoping to limit the political damage.

Republicans can do that most effectively by repudiating the tea party wing of their party and returning to the middle, where they will find Obama and the majority of the American people.