

Kathleen Parker commentary: GOP should rethink food-stamps stance

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If you peruse the news on any given day, the farm-bill/food-stamp debate produces two general impressions: Republicans are heartless turkey thieves; Democrats are spendthrift welfare caterers. If only neither were a little bit right.

As with tabloid stories, there's always a smidgen of truth in the headlines. Yet surely, too, there is some middle ground between such harshly ideological views. But no. We have grown fond of the facile and have wandered far from any willingness to meet halfway, especially when you get more bucks for your bang with hyperbolic indictments of the other side.

The holiday season provides fresh corridors of shame. Last week, Gene Sperling, White House economic adviser, put a Thanksgiving spin on the GOP's efforts to extract the federal food-stamp funding from the farm bill. "At a time when people are about to sit around the table with their families to celebrate a meal," Sperling intoned, "it hardly seems the right time to be pulling food off the table for millions of our neighbors."

Mission accomplished. Imprinted on the collective mind is a craftily placed message: Republicans don't care about poor people. Distilling further, given that Republicans are mostly white — and the welfare model is associated with the Ronald Reagan-generated African-American "welfare queen" — the inference can be made that Republicans don't care about non-whites. Ergo, Republicans are selfish, greedy "haters."

Never underestimate the subliminal power of a holiday message.

While the foregoing is not really true in any significant way (racists exist but don't define the GOP any more than a few welfare scammers define the vast majority of food-stamp recipients), Republicans are nothing if not committed to executing their party's operating principle — *cut spending at all costs* — no matter the consequences or political repercussions. While Senate Democrats want to reduce food-stamp spending by \$4.5 billion over 10 years, House Republicans want to cut \$39 billion, primarily by getting tougher on qualifications.

Republicans seem equally committed to handing their plates to President Barack Obama for second and third helpings of scorn and ridicule, even as their fortune cookie reads: "*You're winning, shut up!*"

Whether Republicans are correct on the economic merits of spending cuts is politically less significant than the more-urgent reality of perception. What could seem more heartless than cutting nutrition aid for 47 million poor people, including 210,000 children whose school meals likely would be eliminated or reduced, in the midst of an anemic recovery from recession, a still-lousy job market and, as Sperling pointed out, the holiday season?

Here's the proper GOP message: "Our entire entitlement system needs reform, but now is not the time to cut food stamps. This is because people still can't find work thanks to a sluggish economy that this administration's policies have failed to improve and the Affordable Care Act is merely making worse."

While the Affordable Care Act continues to dog Democrats, and the president continues to use his executive power to usurp Congress' role in amending the law, Republicans could seek ways to help poor people eat better food, perhaps by tying nutrition education to food-stamp subsidies. Wait, the previous farm bill did just that through education and nutrition incentives. Instead, Republicans want to cut nutrition education, though they do want to make certain types of unhealthy foods off-limits to food-stamp users.

This seems not so much heartless as brainless. The party that wants to teach a man to fish and which has mocked New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg's nannification of food choices doesn't seem much bothered by limiting individual choice when it comes to poor folk.

Wouldn't nutrition education illuminating smart choices be a wiser, more-conservative path than just saying no? When it comes to health care, reducing obesity, the second leading cause of preventable death behind smoking, should be a bipartisan, national imperative.

Thus, wise Republicans should meet Democrats in the middle on this one, not only because keeping nutrition aid and education in place is the right thing to do but because more people needing help merely underscores the conservative view that Democratic policies, especially the Affordable Care Act, are making the job market worse and more people hungry.

When your opponent is headed into a perfect storm, why follow him?

Kathleen Parker writes for the Washington Post Writers Group.

kathleenparker@washpost.com

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