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To: [REDACTED]
Subject: Fw: NYT (Douthat): The Kurtz Republicans

P6/b(6)

Sir -

Remarkable piece.

DM

From: Cutz, Fernando
Sent: Saturday, October 12, 2013 08:44 PM
To: Holzer, Benjamin; Vega, Dag; DL-WHO-Press; DL-WHO-Financial; Vorhaus, Dave; Berman, Lindsey R.; McFarlin, Mac; Monje, Carlos A.; Munoz, Cecilia; Clavel, Lise; Gonzalez, MC; Stevenson, Betsey; Stout, Jennifer; Neill, Allie
Subject: NYT (Douthat): The Kurtz Republicans

The Kurtz Republicans

By ROSS DOUTHAT

“THEY told me,” Martin Sheen’s Willard says to Marlon Brando’s Kurtz in “Apocalypse Now,” at the end of a long journey up the river, “that you had gone totally insane, and that your methods were unsound.”

His baldness bathed in gold, his body pooled in shadow, Kurtz murmurs: “Are my methods unsound?”

And Willard — filthy, hollow-eyed, stunned by what he’s seen — replies: “I don’t see any method at all, sir.”

This is basically how reasonable people should feel about the recent conduct of the House Republicans.

Politics is a hard business, and failure is normal enough. It’s not unusual for political parties to embrace misguided ideas, pursue poorly thought-out strategies, persist in old errors and embrace new ones eagerly.

So we shouldn’t overstate the gravity of what’s been happening in Washington. There are many policies in American history, pursued in good faith by liberals or conservatives, that have been more damaging to the

country than the Republican decision to shut down the government this month, and many gambits that have reaped bigger political disasters than most House Republicans are likely to face as a result.

But there is still something well-nigh-unprecedented about how Republicans have conducted themselves of late. It's not the scale of their mistake, or the kind of damage that it's caused, but the fact that their strategy was such self-evident folly, so transparently devoid of any method whatsoever.

Every sensible person, most Republican politicians included, could recognize that the shutdown fever would blow up in the party's face. Even the shutdown's ardent champions never advanced a remotely compelling story for how it would deliver its objectives. And everything that's transpired since, from [the party's polling nose dive](#) to the frantic efforts to save face, was entirely predictable in advance.

The methodless madness distinguishes this shutdown from prior Congressional Republican defeats (the Gingrich shutdown, the Clinton impeachment), when you could at least see what the politicians involved were thinking. And it distinguishes it, too, from many of history's marches of folly as well.

You could compare the behavior of current House Republicans to the diplomatic sleepwalking that led to World War I, but at least, in that case, the various powers had reasonable theories of how they would actually win the ensuing war.

Or you could compare it to Paraguay's decision in the 1860s to declare war on both Brazil and Argentina at once, but at least Paraguay's armed forces managed to win some victories before being ground into defeat.

Now, admittedly, just because the Republican strategy has been irrational doesn't make it inexplicable. The trends that brought us to this point are clear enough: the discrediting of the Republican establishment during the Bush era; the rise of a populist right that often sees opposition as an end unto itself; the willingness of too many media figures, activists and politicians to stoke that wing's worst impulses; and the current Republican leadership's desire both to prevent an intraparty civil war and avoid a true national disaster like default.

Given this underlying landscape, it may be that John Boehner chose a kind of rational irrationality these last two weeks — accepting the Kurtzian shutdown “strategy” in order to demonstrate its senselessness and persuade his members to behave slightly more sensibly in the future.

But even if Boehner’s decision-making ends up looking like a least-bad approach under the circumstances, he’ll only have won a temporary reprieve. Kurtz Republicanism isn’t likely to go away until somebody else within the party — someone with more movement credibility than the speaker, and more subtlety and vision than Ted Cruz — figures out how to take the energy driving the shutdown and redirect it to more constructive ends.

It’s clear, right now, that the populists can’t be trusted not to drive their party into a ditch. But neither can Republican leaders just declare war on their own base, as some moderates and liberals would have them do.

Instead, Republicans need to seek a kind of integration, which embraces the positive aspects of the new populism — [its hostility to K Street and Wall Street](#), its relative [openness to policy innovation](#), its desire to speak on behalf of Middle America and the middle class — while tempering its Kurtzian streak with prudence, realism, and savoir-faire.

Think of the way that Barack Obama, in his post-2004 ascent, managed to channel the zeal of the antiwar left without being defined by its paranoid excesses, and you can see a recent model for how this kind of integration might work.

But then imagine an alternate reality in which figures like Joe Lieberman and John Kerry were stuck trying to lead a Democratic Party whose backbenchers were mostly net-roots-funded fans of Michael Moore, and you have a decent analog for where the post-Bush Republicans have ended up.

And even if Kurtz doesn’t get the last word in this story, it’s still a long way back down that river.