OUR DECADENT DEMOCRACY

George Will

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Connoisseurs of democratic decadence can savor a variety of contemporary dystopias. Because familiarity breeds banality, Greece has become a boring horror. Japan, however, in its second generation of stagnation is fascinating. Once, Japan bestrode the world, jauntily buying Rockefeller Center and Pebble Beach. Now Japanese buy more adult diapers than those for infants.

America has its lowest birth rate since at least 1920 — family formation and workforce participation (which hit a 30-year low last year) have declined in tandem. But it has an energy surplus, the government-produced overhang of housing inventory is shrinking and the average age of Americans' cars is an astonishing 10.8 years. Such promising economic indicators, however, mask the country's democratic decadence, as explained by the Hudson Institute's Christopher DeMuth in the Dec. 24 Weekly Standard:

Deficit spending once was largely for investments — building infrastructure, winning wars — which benefited future generations, so government borrowing appropriately shared the burden with those generations. Now, however, continuous borrowing burdens future generations in order to finance current consumption. Today's policy, says DeMuth, erases "the distinction between investing for the future and borrowing from the future."

It is now as clear as it is unsurprising that most Americans will be spared the educational experience of "fiscal cliff"-related tax increases and spending cuts, which would have been a small but instructive taste of the real costs of the entitlement state.

Still, December's maneuverings taught three lessons.

First, there will be no significant spending restraint. Democrats — you know: the people respectful of evidence and science — even rejected a more accurate measurement of the cost of living that would slightly slow increases in myriad government benefits. Accuracy will be sacrificed to liberalism's agenda of government growth.

Second, Barack Obama has (as Winston Churchill said of an adversary) "the gift of compressing the largest amount of words into the smallest amount of thought." His incessant talking swaddles one wee idea — raising taxes on "millionaires and billionaires," including people earning less than half a million. He has nothing pertinent to say about the steadily worsening fiscal imbalance that will make sluggish growth — less than 3 percent — normal.

Third, one December winner was George W. Bush because a large majority of Democrats favored making permanent a large majority of his tax cuts. December's rancor disguised bipartisan agreement: Both parties flinch from cliff-related tax increases and spending decreases. But neither the increases nor decreases would have tamed the current $1 trillion-plus budget deficit nor made a discernible dent in the 87-times-larger unfunded liabilities of the entitlement state.

This state cannot be funded by taxing "the rich." Or even by higher income taxes on the middle class. Income taxes cannot fund the government liberals want, and they dare not seek the consumption and energy taxes their entitlement architecture requires. Hence, although Republicans are complicit, Democrats are ardent in embracing decadent democracy. This consists not just of infantilism — refusing to will the means for the ends one has willed — but also of willing an immoral means: conscripting the wealth of future generations.

As economists Glenn Hubbard and Tim Kane explain in National Affairs quarterly, the U.S. political system "cannot govern the entitlement state" that "exists largely to provide material benefits to individuals." Piling up unsustainable entitlement promises — particularly, enactment of Medicare in 1965 and the enrichment of Social Security benefits in 1972 — has been improvident for the nation but rational for the political class. The promised expenditures, far in excess of revenue, would come due "beyond the horizon of political consequences."

"Our politicians," say Hubbard and Kane, "are acting rationally" but "politically rational behavior is now fiscally perverse." Both parties are responding to powerful electoral incentives to neither raise taxes nor cut spending. Hence, "the clash over raising the debt limit that gripped Washington during the summer of 2011 was just the beginning, not the end, of our fiscal woes."

But the perils of the entitlement state are no longer (in Hubbard's and Kane's words) "safely beyond the politicians' career horizons." Furthermore, a critical mass of Republicans reject the careerists' understanding of "politically rational" behavior. These Republicans have a different rationale for being in politics.

The media, which often are the last to know things because their wishes father their thoughts, say the tea party impulse is exhausted. Scores of House Republicans and seven first-term Republican senators (Rand Paul, Mike Lee, Pat Toomey, Ted Cruz, Ron Johnson, Marco Rubio and Tim Scott) will soon — hello, debt ceiling — prove otherwise.