

January 6, 2011

Who Will Lead on Critical U.S. Debt Reduction?

By John Paluszek

With the debate on the national debt now joined, this great nation is now facing a generational inflection point.

We all know that the United States must reduce its long-term debt. But only a surge of public opinion will embolden our political leaders to do the right thing. Who will lead that surge?

This existential challenge, nothing less than a predictor of our children's future quality of life, is arguably a public relations challenge – public relations in the fullest meaning of that term. Because, as Alexis de Tocqueville told the world, "In a democracy, the people get the government they deserve." Without popular support, our political leaders rarely display sufficient courage to ask their constituents to make sacrifices. But that is exactly what has to happen in the United States if we are to avoid financial ruin in the next few years.

(And if you doubt that such a systemic issue is, at root, largely a public relations task, reflect on The Federalist Papers and the national campaigns during The Civil War, World War I and World War II.)

Latent public support

There is much public latent support, and organizational resources, for such a national commitment. Just two of many recent expressions of that support:

- Excerpts from "America Speaks", a national discussion among 3,500 Americans across 57 cities earlier this year:

"Please find the political will to use [this input] as if it were coming from a powerful lobbying group – because we are"; and, "Abandon the failed politics of partisanship. You can't demonize each other and expect us to trust you."

- From "Sow the Seeds of Long-Term Growth" by Jeffrey Sachs, in The Financial Times, July 18, 2010:

"The ... final element [in a proper U.S. investment recovery plan] should be a medium-term fiscal framework that will credibly reduce the federal budget deficit to sustainable levels within five years."

What is to be done?

First, this is not an either-or discussion – it's not about choosing financial stimulus to address our current economic miasma *or* committing to long-term debt reduction. Rather, it is a recognition that markets, both business and consumer, need a modicum of certainty for their long-term planning as well as for current expenditures.

It would be extremely naïve to suggest that there is a short-term, simple and painless solution to the systemic damage more than a decade in the making. The underlying, fundamental questions are formidable: Is our political-economic system broken – or just temporarily dysfunctional? Is political "post-partisan" progress just a chimera? Is progressive change virtually unattainable in a federal legislature that often demands "super-majorities"? Have we defined civility in public discourse downward? Are we prepared to return to responsible saving instead of imprudent consumption? Will business executives manage their enterprises for the sustainable long-term? Will civil society dialogue with the Establishment responsibly? Will educators instill community spirit? And will media eschew polarizing journalism?

In sum, is the United States destined to lag authoritarian, one-party "state capitalism" countries because they can more easily achieve the unanimity or at least consensus that too often eludes us?

We don't have to -- and mustn't – succumb to that kind of pessimism. The United States has tremendous domestic economic, political and social resources, as well as an imposing impact around the world. And it has historically risen to comparable existential challenges. This should not be understated.

Political risk in the public interest

On one critical level, the solution is deceptively simple: Elect leaders who have the public interest uppermost in mind – legislators and administrators who, risking their political careers, make the hard choices in the public interest. And although the substance of the needed public policy communication is critical, "style" of the message also counts greatly. Matt Bai has written that "the pivotal question for advocates of budget reform may be how to communicate [a] more optimistic vision to voters, rather than focusing relentlessly on the pain they intend to conflict." Yes, "style points" will count in such a national communication campaign.

The epicenter for such action is the just-issued report of the President's National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. This bi-partisan commission, having voted 11 to 7 in favor of a spectrum of shared sacrifices by virtually all Americans, has already generated several alternative plans and much public discourse. The ultimate plan will no doubt require many tough choices and political courage and commitment. We may be in for a long, tough – but absolutely necessary – slog in modernizing a complex and fragile national system so that it can be more competitive in a globalized, multi-polar world. That would be good news, indeed.

So the central question for our national leaders, and for each of us, is:
Who will lead?

John Paluszek is senior counsel at Ketchum and 2009-2011 Chair of The Global Alliance For Public Relations and Communication Management.

(This commentary is adapted from "Who Will Lead?", in the Fall issue of The Public Relations Strategist, published by The Public Relations Society of America.)