

About Boehner's speech

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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In his [combative response](#) to President Obama's speech last night, House Speaker John Boehner offered an uncommonly crystalized rendition of an all too common bit of GOP nonsense:

The solution to this crisis is not complicated: if you're spending more money than you're taking in, you need to spend less of it.

The rush transcript from the *Wall Street Journal* mistakenly ends this sentence with a comma, as if the transcriber were waiting for the phrase that follows logically: "...and/or take in more of it." It didn't come. Without that phrase, it's the usual bait and switch: if the budget deficit is a problem, smaller government is somehow the only solution. Add the phrase and the sentence is obviously correct, clear to any eight-year-old who's figured out how to get her lemonade stand in the black.

The difference between the two--between reducing the deficit solely with spending cuts and doing so with both cuts and modest revenue increases--is the only substantive difference involved in the debt-ceiling fight. But you wouldn't know it from Boehner's turbocharged rhetoric. (Obama "wants a blank check"? In what sense can a check written to pay for specific expenses already incurred be described as blank?) The Speaker can't prevent voters from seeing the Republicans as extreme and unyielding, but he can try to make Democrats look just as bad, facts be damned.

It seems to work for him. After countless Democratic concessions and zero Republican ones, Bloomberg is still able to corral a [heap](#) of voter-on-the-street quotes to the effect of "a pox on both their houses." Americans want compromise, not gridlock! CCblogger Robert McDowell's [comparison](#) between politics and marriage is helpful as far as it goes: in either case, nothing works without compromise. But the relevant analog isn't two people having an honest go at sorting through their differences; it's a marriage in which one partner bends over backward while the other refuses to budge.

Boehner is trying to push his own proposal through Congress. If he succeeds, it's not clear whether Obama will sign it into law. It's hard to veto a bill that would steer us around financial disaster at the last possible second. On the other hand, [according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) it would do so by steering us into "the greatest increase in poverty and hardship produced by any law in modern U.S. history"--and it would set the stage for another debt-ceiling fight next year.

That doesn't work for Obama, whose biggest goal is to come out of this process well-primed for reelection. While it's been frustrating to see him [give up so much in the effort to reach a deal](#), it's important to remember [how limited a president's power really is](#). If the Republicans don't ever want to say yes, they don't have to.

Obama does, however, have some other options. If Congress has no more luck getting to yes than the Obama-Boehner talks did, the president could [invoke the 14th amendment](#) or even [mint a \\$1 trillion coin or two](#). The fact that the White House won't talk publicly about such unilateral courses of action doesn't mean it's not considering them.