

Profile in "courage"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

April 7, 2011

What does courage look like in an elected official? A couple things come to mind:

- Honesty:
speaking the truth even when it's unpleasant or inconvenient
- Principled
confrontation: refusing to shrink from a serious and forthright debate when the real-world stakes are high
- Moral
clarity: risking re-election and advancement in favor of doing what's right

[Pundits have been praising](#) Rep. Paul Ryan, the Wisconsin Republican who chairs the House budget committee, for the courage displayed in his 2012 [budget proposal](#). But their definition of "courage" must be different from mine:

- Ryan's
budget rhetoric is misleading. He would privatize Medicare and convert Medicaid to a block grant, a lump sum of federal money given to the states to administer. But he would also make cuts to both programs--and as Ezra Klein [explains](#), it's the cuts, not the reforms, that would save money. Yet Ryan [suggests otherwise](#). After all, privatization and state control perform far better in polls than reduced health coverage for poor people and retirees.
- His
math is fuzzy. It [relies](#) on some implausible optimism about the plan's effects over time. For example, even if you believe that lower tax rates for rich people and corporations will somehow lead to more revenue, it's absurd

to expect this to add up to \$100 billion in the first year. But that's what Ryan's budget assumes, based on a combination of faith in business and [unspecified](#) savings from reducing tax breaks. The Congressional Budget Office--the nonpartisan budget umpire--[doesn't share](#) all of Ryan's number-crunching optimism.

- Ryan's math, however, does give him the rhetorical space to engage in not a forthright debate but a sneaky proxy one: in the name of taking on the deficit, Ryan [exploits it](#) in order to shrink the government ([specifically](#), those parts of the government [that help low-income Americans](#)). [Like the separate effort](#) to cut social spending *this year*--which is about to [force a government shutdown](#)--Ryan offers [conservative red meat](#) dressed up as courageous serious-mindedness about the deficit.
- Ryan also offers [few details](#) as to how a lot of what he proposes would be accomplished. The plan may be confrontational, but it isn't serious policy. It's an ideological broadside--in Ryan's own words, "[it's a cause](#)."
- I don't think Ryan's risking much here, though his party [might be](#). His budget won't become law in its current form, but that was a foregone conclusion. His congressional district (in which I grew up) is unlikely to punish him for this, and his alleged courage will only cement his status as a rising star.

I think Ryan's plan is immoral. I imagine he sees things differently. But even assuming he believes his plan is the right and just thing to do, where's the courage in framing it in such misleading ways?

If Ryan believes seniors should have to pay more for their health care, he should say so. If he believes that spending cuts ought to primarily target programs that help low-income people, he should explain why. In a time of staggering inequality and rising deficits, if Ryan thinks rich folks are due

for a major tax cut, he ought to make this case directly--and without the fuzzy math.

Until he does, people should stop saying his budget plan is courageous. It's certainly aggressive, but that's not the same thing--and the fact that pundits blur the two speaks of deep problems in our public life.