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Stimulus is Anything But

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When are George Bush and his congressional buddies finally going to grow up?

Hey, guys, we're at war. Bombs are carpeting Afghan villages. People are dying of bio-terror on the home front. Is it too much to ask for even a semblance of dignity and responsibility among our leaders in domestic affairs?

Apparently so, judging from the House Republicans' proposed stimulus package.

Tax cuts for the rich, who don't need the money and are unlikely to spend it any time soon. Dirt for the poor, who do need it and would. And something akin to contempt for the nearly 1 million workers who've suddenly been thrown out of work in the past couple of months.

As Rep. Dick Armey, R-Texas, explained last weekend on "Meet the Press," helping them out with some extra unemployment insurance — as we easily could with the \$40 billion in federal funds just sitting there for precisely that purpose, and as the nation has routinely done in the past in times of recession — would be "a feeble response" not "commensurate with the American spirit." Apparently the appropriately muscular response, consistent with that spirit, is to screw 'em.

Wow. Think about that statement for a moment. Not "commensurate with the American spirit."

Let's say you're a first generation Thai immigrant who fled your home country, in terror, to come to this land of the free. You live in Queens, N.Y., where your daughter is a straight-A student with a chance of getting into Bronx Science. Your English is still imperfect, but you cherish — and I mean cherish — the photo your family took of you just a few weeks ago, saying the Pledge of Allegiance as a new U.S. citizen at the traditional joyous ceremony in the federal building in downtown Manhattan.

But now, because of some monster terrorists flying planes into buildings there, something over which even Dick Armey would admit you have no control, you're about to lose your job making beds and cleaning toilets in a midtown hotel. And you just don't know what you're going to do. You really don't, because the market for chambermaids isn't what it used to be, even a few weeks ago.

Talking about this with the nutty professor from Wisconsin who frequently stays there on business, you start crying, and then apologize for doing so.

Well, apologies are not enough, you lousy excuse for the American dream! Stop your whining! Realize that for this great country to help you out a little bit now with a few extra weeks of unemployment insurance would not be "commensurate" with its spirit.

Now, giving some billionaires a few more billion, well, that's a different matter.

Responding to this grotesque circus, White House budget director Mitch Daniels offered a moment of honest response. "The corral gates" have been blown open, he said, and "the animals are running loose."

But if you thought this foreshadowed some correction by Republican senators in the appalling House proposal, dream on. For now we see their proposal, offered in "moderation" of their colleagues in the House. And believe it or not, it's even worse!

Still almost nothing for the poor. Still no serious effort on unemployment insurance. But this time even more giveaways to the rich! The House bill did this in part by accelerating the tax breaks promised some of them — in 2004 and 2006 — in the giant tax bill of earlier this year.

The Senate accelerates all these breaks — for everyone in the 28 percent bracket or above. This little maneuver would cost the country \$122 billion over the next 10 years. More than three-quarters of this money would start flowing to fat-cat pockets after 2002 — when the recession is predicted to be over.

And get this: Fully 55 percent of this goes to the top 1 percent of families! For a married couple with two kids and an income of \$66,550 or less, as Congress' Joint Committee on Taxation's own analysis shows, this acceleration of the upper-bracket rates would yield no tax cut whatsoever.

Now, is this really a responsible way for our leaders to behave? It's a fair enough question, I think, especially of those Republicans who act as if they've got some monopoly on understanding the burdens of adult responsibility — unlike those bleeding heart liberals or that pathologically infantile former president who just left.

The ones who love to lecture the less fortunate to stop their whining and stand on their own. Whiny workers with incomes down a third from a generation ago. Or whiny single mothers raising kids in abject poverty, who our leaders think need to be pushed into dead-end jobs and torn off

the public teat.

* Is it really responsible, gentlemen, to do next to nothing about the economic problems facing this nation while tying government's hands in the future by locking in more regressive tax cuts? Is that what it means to be an adult and face up to problems, not dodge them, while caring for the future and those around you?

That's not what my mama taught me. And yours?

Joel Rogers teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is founder and director of the Center on Wisconsin Strategy (COWS), which administers the Sustaining Wisconsin campaign. This is another in a weekly series of Capital Times columns he's writing on issues in the campaign. For more information, see www.cows.org and www.sustainingwisconsin.org.

Joel Rogers is director of COWS, the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, at the UW-Madison. On Jan. 29, COWS debuted "Sustaining Wisconsin," a statewide dialogue about the future of Wisconsin. The themes expressed in this view of the state of the state will carry through the next 18 months as COWS uses Sustaining Wisconsin to put the Wisconsin Idea into action.

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