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## When did sacrifice become a dirty word?

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Last week, U.S. Rep. Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, waltzed right up to the edge of a dangerous concept in this country - without stepping over the ledge.

Blue dog Democrat that he is, Minnick told a gathering of Western Democrats meeting at Worley that they can't govern like spend-and-borrow Republicans and hope to retain power.

"(President George W.) Bush doubled the national debt from \$5 trillion to \$10 trillion. (President Barack) Obama, under the most optimistic assumptions, is going to double it again in another eight years."

The scope of the problem is staggering. At \$11.7 trillion, the national debt is so huge that the Concord Coalition's portable debt clocks have been retired. They lack a 14th digit to record the current debt, which by the way is now half the nation's economic output in one year.

What Minnick didn't say is how he'd bring the deficits under control. Doing so means abandoning the notion of cutting taxes without reducing spending and just hoping for the best.

Almost half the current deficits trace back to Bush's 2001 tax cuts, which lowered the top rate from 39.6 percent to 35 percent, repealed the estate tax and halved taxes on capital gains and dividends.

More than a third stems from defense, including fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Entitlements - such as Medicaid - raised spending 10 percent and government programs cost 6 percent more in the last decade.

Digging out means raising taxes, and not simply on the rich. You want these programs? You'll have to start paying for them.

Health care reform will mean scrutinizing how those dollars will be spent. Some if not most of us will pay income taxes on our employer-provided health care insurance. The age of retirement will be raised. Social Security benefits will be cut and/or payroll taxes will be jacked up.

Call it what you like. Short-term pain. Mutual sacrifice. Prevention. It's an ideal as old as Thomas Paine's "times that try men's souls" and as recent as John F. Kennedy's "Ask not what your country can do for you ..."

For the politician who asks his fellow citizens to sacrifice, there's the risk of defeat. Thirty years ago this summer, President Jimmy Carter called upon the country to "face the truth and then we can change our course." It was labeled the "malaise speech" - a word that did not appear in the text - and a year later, the country chose the sunny optimism of Ronald Reagan.

Nearly 20 years ago, President George H. W. Bush crossed party lines and boosted taxes, putting the country on a stronger financial basis. But it repudiated the Reaganesque notion of something-for-nothing. For that, he lost his re-election bid.

Bill Clinton also raised taxes. The maneuver fueled an economic boom but condemned Clinton to six years of a GOP-led Congress.

Such evidence would suggest Americans are incapable of facing tough choices. But how can you know until leaders step forward and level with them?

Minnick came close last week. Just not close enough. - M.T.