

Make 2013 a year of renewal, not ruin

Written by Rev. Jesse Jackson, Sr.
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The new year begins with a bad hangover from 2012's inane debate over the "fiscal cliff." The furious debate focused only on how much damage would be done to the economy and who would pay the price, how much and what would be cut, who would pay higher taxes and who would suffer the most.

But this headache can't define 2013, which must be a time to renew, not to ruin. Whatever final agreement comes out of the fiscal cliff will slow an economy already struggling to grow. The challenge is to turn to what can be done to rebuild, to put people to work, to boost, not cripple growth.

The challenges we face are great. Many neighborhoods in our cities are suffering unemployment rates of 40 percent. That is a recipe for disintegration. Chicago just mourned the 500th murder victim. Millions of homes are still underwater. Wages are still declining, not rising. Inequality, already at extreme levels, is rising, not falling.

We need a plan to rebuild America. We have a plan for Iraq. We have a plan on how to get our troops out of Afghanistan while helping to rebuild that nation — yet, we aren't even talking about a plan to rebuild our own cities.

Why not a Marshall Plan to rebuild America's urban areas? The Marshall Plan provided long-term, low-interest loans to Europe after World War II. It put people to work, provided hope and helped to revive economies devastated by wartime destruction. Now we need a plan for our cities that will revive them from Wall Street's destruction.

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Why not take a portion of workers' pension funds, provide them with government guarantees, and create a network of urban development banks committed to rebuilding our impoverished urban ghettos and barrios? Use the workers' money to put workers to work building affordable housing, retrofitting buildings to capture energy savings, rebuilding collapsing sewers and roads, expanding outmoded mass transit.

Add basic reforms to ensure that workers share in the increased productivity and profits they help to create. Raise the minimum wage and crack down on wage theft. Give priority to companies that make things in America and allow workers to organize and bargain collectively. Get this right, and we will begin to rebuild a broad middle class and boost the economy. With good jobs, workers buy homes and cars and send their kids to college. Their demand leads small businesses to create jobs. We all grow together. Workers move from food stamps to paying taxes. Growth is the best and necessary way to get our books in order.

In 2012, Washington tied itself in knots over a self-created fiscal-cliff debate that is all about constriction, not expansion. That debate is teed up to consume the next few months, as well, as the government runs into the so-called debt ceiling while Republicans vow to hold the full faith and credit of the United States hostage to even deeper cuts in vital domestic programs. Yet the cuts already in place will reduce domestic spending as a portion of our economy to levels not seen since the 1950s. This is the road to decline and despair.

The only thing that can change the folly in Washington is the mobilization of people. Many are cynical about a Washington corrupted by big money politics. But citizens in motion can challenge big money. We saw that with the Tea Party uprising that demanded action on deficits and spending. We saw that with Occupy protests that put extreme inequality and the crushing of the American Dream on the agenda.

Now citizens must rise again to demand action to rebuild America.

Keep up with Rev. Jackson and the Rainbow PUSH Coalition at www.rainbowpush.org.