

By Kathleen Parker

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Actually, no, Mr. Vice President, the tea party gang wasn't "acting like terrorists." They were acting like kidnapers. Let's get our insults correct.

They weren't inflicting harm on members of a group of people in order to terrorize the larger group. They acted like kidnapers who seize and detain a person (in this case, a nation of persons) in exchange for ransom.

I'm exaggerating for effect, of course, since no one was actually seized and no force was used. Nothing was illegal, just annoying. Besides, like Joe Biden, I'm only saying they "acted like," not that they are.

This is the progressive-parenting approach to scolding. You never tell Johnny he's a bad boy; he's just "acting bad." You might even say he's doing a darned good imitation of a bad boy. But he's not intrinsically, genetically, irretrievably, beyond-help bad. Unless, of course, he keeps acting, in which case he could become the thing he's acting really good at.

I'm just trying to defend the English language here, not poor Joe, whose brain is often two steps behind his mouth. Biden's offhand remark to some other Democrats has caused quite a ruckus. All the world's a-Twitter. But then it always is. Ruckuses are pretty easy to start these days.

Tea party congresspeople and the folks who elected them are proud of themselves for standing fast during the debt-ceiling standoff. They wouldn't give an inch even if it meant the country catapulted down the abyss and markets were destabilized. It was the principle of the thing, we heard over and over.

Here's another principle oft repeated, to my mailbox, anyway. Families don't spend more than they have; the government shouldn't either. Except, of course, families routinely spend more than they have. They borrow money to buy houses and cars. They borrow to take vacations and to send their kids to college. So, although we might agree to the principle that we shouldn't spend more than we have, we do. So does our government.

This doesn't mean that there shouldn't be limits on how much we borrow. Clearly, we're beginning to come to our senses and the tea party deserves some credit. This is to say, the American people deserve credit for insisting that their elected representatives act more responsibly.

But this includes, or should, not holding the nation hostage and placing our economy at even greater risk. Extracting promises while threatening to allow the government to default — even the debate over which has caused problems that likely will be far-reaching — was, well, acting like hostage-takers. As The Wall Street Journal's Francesco Guerrera wrote Tuesday, “You just don't push the world's largest economy and the most liquid financial markets to the brink of disaster without causing damage somewhere.”

The debt-ceiling crisis has been averted, but only temporarily. In another six months, we'll have another go at the same exercise — and now we have a precedent. What will the tea party faction extract next time? What's to keep them from insisting on defunding an unpopular program in exchange for allowing the country to meet its financial obligations?

More important, what kind of confidence will we observe in markets and investors in the meantime? The conservative view, with which I happen to agree, is that confidence is crucial to growth and stability. In effect, the tea party gang has undermined its own central philosophical tenet.

Holding fast to a principle that undermines your own objectives doesn't make you a terrorist or a kidnapper, but it might mean you're doing a darned good imitation of a foolish person.