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Howard Kurtz's *Newsweek* Slam at Obama Distorts Political Reality

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With one paragraph at the end of his [column](#) in the current (June 4-11) *Newsweek*, Howard Kurtz unwittingly revealed what's wrong with the way the mainstream media cover politics.

Kurtz devoted most of the column to explore which Democrats are lining up to run for president in 2016. He concludes that two centrist governors -- New York's Andrew Cuomo and Maryland's Martin O'Malley -- are currently the strongest candidates.

In his final paragraph, Kurtz writes:

Both O'Malley and Cuomo are plainspoken pragmatists rather than purveyors of lofty rhetoric. So far, at least, they have managed to produce results by working with Republicans -- a sharp contrast with the perpetual dysfunction of Barack Obama's Washington.

As my high school English teacher used to ask: What's wrong with this sentence?

Let's start with Kurtz's words, "the perpetual dysfunction of Barack Obama's Washington." Kurtz is no doubt referring to the belligerent battles between Democrats and Republicans over legislation, regulation, and appointments. The media often label this "dysfunction" as "gridlock" or "paralysis." In referring to this as "Barack Obama's Washington," Kurtz isn't simply describing a geographic entity, but a political one, and implies that it is the president who is responsible, or who at least shares much of the blame, for this predicament.

This is nonsense. Kurtz, a former *Washington Post* writer, seems to have missed the widely-read and discussed column by Thomas Mann and Norman Ornstein, "[Let's Just Say It: The Republicans are the Problem.](#)" that appeared in the *Post* on April 27. Mann and Ornstein are both middle-of-the-road political analysts (at the Brookings Institution and American Enterprise Institute, respectively). "We have been studying Washington politics and Congress for more than 40 years," they wrote, "and never have we seen them this dysfunctional."

Mann and Ornstein attribute most of that dysfunction to the Republicans' dramatic turn to the right. "The GOP has become an insurgent outlier in American politics. It is ideologically extreme; scornful of compromise; unmoved by conventional understanding of facts, evidence and science; and dismissive of the legitimacy of its political opposition." According to Mann and Ornstein, "Today, thanks to the GOP, compromise has gone out the window in Washington."

They also criticize the media for its faux even-handedness in blaming both parties for the current condition, utilizing the convenient "he said/she said" formula to avoid informing readers that you can't always find the truth just by splitting the difference. They observe that, "a balanced treatment of an unbalanced phenomenon distorts reality."

Mann and Ornstein's op-ed was based on their new book, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided With the New Politics of Extremism*. In it, they draw on studies by a number of political scientists that reveal that the GOP's center of gravity has shifted sharply to the right. This occurred even before the rise of the Tea Party, Fox News, and the Supreme Court's 2010 *Citizens United* decision, which unleashed the big-spending right-wing billionaires like the Koch Brothers.

But the Republicans' mad dash to the right has accelerated in the past two years. The phrase "moderate Republican" has become an oxymoron. Even conservatives like Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana are viewed as too compromising by the GOP extremist wing that has taken over the party. The few moderates left within the party, like Sen. Olympia Snowe, are either losing primary battles or deciding to exit voluntarily.

In contrast, according to studies that examine the voting records and ideological commitments of members of Congress, the Democrats have remained mainly a "centrist" party in which a progressive-liberal wing (like Sen. Sherrod Brown and Rep. Donna Edwards) vies for influence with a more corporate-friendly moderate wing (such as Sen. Max Baucus and Rep. Dan Boren).

As Mann and Ornstein point out: "While the Democrats may have moved from their 40-yard line to their 25, the Republicans have gone from their 40 to somewhere behind their goal post."

The Republicans in the Senate and House have not only become more rigidly right-wing, but they've also become more disciplined and aggressive, wielding the once rarely-used filibuster to thwart almost every piece of legislation that Obama and

the Democrats propose and viewing the very idea of compromise as a form of ideological treason.

Obama has gone out of his way -- *too* far for some progressives and liberals -- to find a middle ground with the Republicans, but the GOP has been consistently unwilling to compromise.

So Kurtz's attempt to contrast Cuomo and O'Malley as "plainspoken pragmatists" and other "purveyors of lofty rhetoric" (an undeserved jab at Obama) is utterly ridiculous -- an example of the kind of unthinking "balanced" reporting that distorts rather than illuminates.

Obama has faced an almost impossible situation in terms of governing the country and translating his agenda into law. Despite this, he's pushed through landmark legislation, including health care reform, the stimulus package, dismantling "Don't Ask/Don't Tell," and many others.

Kurtz was the *Washington Post's* media critic for many years and now hosts CNN's weekly media program *Reliable Sources* on Sundays. Perhaps he should invite Mann and Ornstein on the show to discuss their new book and explain to Kurtz that the gridlock confronting our political system is due much more to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the Koch brothers, Grover Norquist, Fox News, the Tea Party, Sen. Mitch McConnell, and Rep. Eric Cantor than to "Barack Obama's Washington."

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