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## Battle over national debt ceiling has negotiation experts shaking their heads



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By David A. Fahrenthold, Published: May 11

Amateurs.

That's the frustrated conclusion that America's professional negotiators have reached, after watching Washington's politicians begin their own negotiation over the national debt ceiling.

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These professionals are ex-FBI agents, labor mediators, divorce counselors. They have learned the rules that help resolve unsolvable standoffs: Don't lie to a man on a high ledge. Don't box yourself in with sweeping threats. Don't tell your adversary to "act like an adult."

Now, they have watched the two parties bend or break those three rules. They worry that the politicians' mistakes might only prolong their

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And it bugs them to see their art practiced this way. It’s one thing, negotiators say, to threaten the country with financial calamity if your demands aren’t met.

It’s another thing to do it incorrectly.

“There *are* ways to do this. There are tried and proven ways to deal with difficult negotiations,” said [William Ury](#), who helped found Harvard’s Project on Negotiation and co-wrote the negotiation-lit classic “[Getting to Yes](#).” “They work daily, in difficult hostage negotiations. Why not apply them?”

“The country,” Ury said, “deserves better negotiations.”

This negotiation is about raising America’s credit-card limit. If the debt ceiling isn’t raised beyond the current cap of \$14.3 trillion, administration officials say the nation could begin defaulting on its debts in

early August.

But the Republicans who control the House have said they won’t automatically vote to raise it. On Monday night in New York, House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) laid out his party’s demands.

“Without significant spending cuts and changes in the way we spend the American people’s money, there will be no increase in the debt limit,” Boehner said, [in an address to the Economic Club of New York](#).

A Washington negotiation is different than most, of course: It is also political theater, a performance for an audience of partisans and voters. But it still involves two sides that have to agree, despite their opinions, their grudges and their own stubborn egos.

And right now, experts say, these two sides aren’t helping themselves.

“It’s time to grow up and get serious!” Boehner [said about President Obama last month in a TV interview](#).

“[Speaker Boehner](#) needs to have an adult moment right here and now,” Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) [told reporters Monday](#).

At their offices in Rockville, this is the kind of talk that [divorce mediators John Spiegel and Donna Duquette](#) do not allow.

“If I heard that, I would cut it off right there,” said Spiegel, who has counseled hundreds of couples in the middle of bitter separations.

“We want to make sure that you’re heard, and so the way you’re expressing it is going to help you,” Duquette said, recalling what she’d tell a spouse in that situation. “If you’re name-calling, if you’re questioning the other person’s motive, they’re not going to hear your good ideas.”

On the Republican side of the table, Ury — the “Getting to Yes” author — said Boehner chose a strategy that might leave him trapped in a political corner. The problem, he said, was that Boehner had issued a threat to do something unusually drastic: possibly allowing the country

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**boblesch** wrote:

- if republicans say
- no tax increases .
- no cuts to defense spending.
- we will only allow cuts to social programs to decrease the long term debt.

- and if the democrats respond with
- no cuts to programs for the poor and disabled .
  - no cuts to seniors.
  - we will only allow cuts to defense and tax increases to bring down the long term debt.

then we have both positions clearly on the table - who bl... [See More](#)

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**Nymous** wrote:

These are stupid people, elected by people who were dumb enough to vote for them. It's not reasonable to expect them to be smart about negotiating when they're complete idiots about everything else they do. They didn't care about any of this debt when they were busy making it, and won't admit to making mistakes, instead they want double down on the same idiot policies that got us in this mess.

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