

The tea party made a bitter brew for fellow Republicans in Congress. The barely adequate support that enabled passage in the Senate and House of a budget-cutting bill to raise the nation's debt ceiling jangled nerves and divided usually like-minded members among themselves. For America's sake, the legislation passed. Yesterday was the deadline to avoid default on the nation's bills.

The sharp divisions in the House mirrored what this debate came down to. Democrats aren't happy, dissatisfied with the threat to entitlement programs so important to vulnerable citizens and the absence of additional revenues in the final bill - revenues that could have been raised with complete fairness. Veteran **Rep. David Price of Chapel Hill** voted "No" and with justification called this entire episode "a manufactured crisis."

Price reflected the views of many in his party that raising the debt ceiling in the wake of a severe recession should have been routine, and that any budget cuts should have been accompanied by steps such as ending tax loopholes (he cited oil companies).

The GOP, driven by its most extreme "tea party" element, would have none of that. It seemed at times, in fact, as if those in the tea party might have been willing to let the recession take hold again, just to teach everybody a lesson about the importance of smaller government and lower taxes. As it stands, the compromise provides for a raising of the debt ceiling by stages, a deficit reduction of more than \$2 trillion over 10 years (more than \$900 billion now, with a bipartisan House-Senate committee to find an additional \$1.5 trillion before year's end) and a bow to Republican demands for a vote on a balanced budget amendment.

It reflects far more of what Republicans wanted than it does the wishes of Democrats.

Without a compromise, the consequences for the country's economy and for Americans in general would have been dire, from a collapse in the stock market to soaring interest rates due to a downgrade of the federal government's credit rating.

Paul Krugman, the columnist and Nobel economics laureate, blasted the outcome, saying that cutting government spending in a depressed economy will make that economy worse, and that

big cuts without revenue increases were a foolish surrender by President Obama. Americans can only hope that view turns out to have been too pessimistic. Another potential problem lies in the joint committee that's supposed to identify spending cuts. If it is made up of ideologues on both sides, will it be in permanent state of confrontation?

The shame is that absent the level of stubborn ideology that dominated this debate, confronting the country's massive debt would have been a worthwhile endeavor. And for all the criticism he received during this fight, Obama took a serious step in the debt-reduction discussion when he created the commission headed by Erskine Bowles, retired president of the University of North Carolina system, and former Wyoming Republican Sen. Alan Simpson. Their group came up with tough stuff, including adjustments in entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare.

But the president and other leaders seemed unwilling to support the sacrifices that the commission suggested. Now, we can hope at least that the group's ideas, painful though they are, may gain steam.

The commission's assessment of the threat posed by the debt could spur a more constructive discussion aimed at solutions rather than the tea party's rhetoric, which seemed aimed primarily at damaging the president.

It appears now that extremes have been overcome by those who understand that politics is more than about rhetoric and arguments that occasionally become strident. But in the end, those who sit in the Congress must answer their most noble calling, to govern.