

Psychology of debt talks is all in game of chicken

28 July 2011, By SETH BORENSTEIN , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- Psychologists and mediators compare the political wrangling over the debt limit to a dangerous game of "chicken" with both sides racing cars at each other head-on.

This is not [political rhetoric](#). It's a real-life psychological negotiating scenario where it sometimes helps to seem crazy, international relations experts say. And while it usually ends in a fair deal, sometimes it's a complete disaster.

Much of the debt limit talks are secret, so progress could be being made; White House officials Thursday expressed some optimism. Outside experts, though, don't like what they can see from the public statements.

"If there is a recipe for poor negotiations and poor negotiation outcome, watch what these political leaders have been doing these past few days," said Daniel L. Shapiro, founder of the Harvard International Negotiation Program. This is from a psychologist who has started a mediation program used in 30 countries and has been named "Peacemaker of the Year" by a mediation society.

"There's very little listening, very little learning - mutual learning - very little cross-group communication, very little creative thinking," he said.

Still, there's hope this marriage can be saved, the experts say. What's needed is a sense of empathy on both sides, the idea that we're all in this together, said some professional mediators and psychologists contacted by The Associated Press.

They blame a lack of trust, pandering to political bases and too much heated emotions.

"If you start framing this as a war, it becomes a war," Shapiro said. "This is very dangerous."

Shapiro called it a "very deadly game of chicken,"

noting that chicken is a negotiation scenario well studied by psychologists, [sociologists](#), economists and diplomats. In the game, two cars drive head-on. If neither swerves out of the way there is the worst possible outcome: a crash. If both swerve, everyone survives with the same honor. The ultimate win: one doesn't swerve, the other does.

Another way to win: throw the steering wheel out the window and make sure the other side knows it and will be forced to flinch. Shapiro thinks that's happened in Washington, but American University international studies professor Joshua Goldstein disagrees.

Goldstein, who has written a book chapter about the chicken game in diplomacy, said the side that has the least to lose is more believable when it threatens to ditch the steering wheel and go for broke: "It gives the weaker party more negotiating power."

In this situation, tea party followers have more credibility in their throw-the-wheel-out threats and President Barack Obama, who wants to be re-elected, can't play consequences-be-damned, he said.

The game of chicken "has to be dangerous in order to give people the incentive to cooperate. It helps if you are crazy or if you pretend to be crazy," Goldstein said.

Psychologists have shown in experiments that the chicken game's mutual destruction possibility somehow gets individuals to cooperate more, about two-thirds of the time. But that's not necessarily the case with groups. When two groups of people are involved, the best possible outcome occurs only about a quarter of the time, and the chance of complete disaster rises, a 1997 study in the Journal of Conflict Resolution shows.

Leaders can be more likely to compromise but their

colleagues push them to not make concessions and instead head off the cliff, Shapiro said.

Watching the debt negotiations reminds Linda Tropp, a professor of psychology at University of Massachusetts Amherst, of the continuing Israel and Palestinian conflict. It's more competitive bargaining than a give-and-take dialogue, said Tropp, director of her school's peace and violence program.

"This seems increasingly more entrenched," Tropp said. "And the more we go on this route toward protracted conflict, the harder and harder it will be to undo the pain of the past."

The key to breaking that deadlock is trying to see the other side's view more and to humanize - not demonize - your counterpart, both Tropp and Shapiro said.

Shapiro said both sides have to "turn this from a me-versus-you situation to a shared problem. If this does not go well, this is bad for everybody."

Perhaps most optimistic is Stanley Renshon, a political psychologist at the City University of New York. He compares the debt fight to the Cold War with both sides' fingers on the nuclear button in a scenario called mutually assured destruction. Renshon is sure the fear of economic and political catastrophe will result in a last-minute deal, saying "reality is a pretty strong motivator."

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