

the economics mix, something unlike what he had been used to at CBO, even though he had been working for politicians in Congress. Of the difference he says, “CBO is correctly seen by the press as being a pretty impartial neutral arbiter and playing it straight, so that was not hard. The OMB job is a more challenging combination because it’s got part where you are supposed to be analytical and rigorous and bringing evidence to bear, but you are also part of the president’s economics team, and you’re a West Wing staffer. But you’re also in the cabinet, Senate-confirmed, and have external responsibilities. So that can get a little awkward.” He dealt with the awkward dance between politics and policy by adopting a rule: “I would only say true things, but everything that was true I didn’t need to say.”

“I THINK THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING AT THIS POINT IS TO RESIST THE STRONG TREND TOWARDS POLARIZATION THAT IS HOLLOWING OUT THE MIDDLE OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM AND MAKING EVIDENCE-BASED DEBATE DIFFICULT.”

At OMB, Orszag was instrumental in shaping the health care reform bill that Obama signed in 2010, shortly after which he announced his resignation

and moved on. Currently he is an executive at Citigroup, a position he sees not as his final career move but as an important one. He told us: “I’m going to go five to ten years into the private sector, have a different set of experiences and then—I believe very firmly that people who have different experiences, whether it’s within government (not staying in the same agency but going legislative versus executive or changing topics and areas) or just government versus the private sector—as long as you are actually doing something new, it leads to more insight. One of the things that I’ve enjoyed so much at CBO and OMB is being able to do different things and bring insights from one field to another, and I have always found that people who have a breadth of experience are the most interesting and can bring a lot to whatever task that they are currently doing. So it’s time for me to do something different and I’m going to do it.”

On public versus private service:

The thing I would say about government versus business and applying what you have learned, is that especially in places like the Council of Economic Advisers or the National Economic Council, etc., the breadth and depth is unmatched compared to most other settings. In terms of getting exposure to lots of different areas, it’s difficult to beat. On top of that is, of course, whatever benefit one derives psychologically from a sense of public service. What

I say is as long as you feel like you are contributing to forward progress, the return in terms of your sense of self is extraordinarily high.

On keeping the republic:

I think the single most important thing at this point is to resist the strong trend towards polarization that is hollowing out the middle of the political spectrum and making evidence-based debate difficult. So that means toning down the volume on either left or right medium streams on cable news and on the blogosphere. And there is a broader point to that, too, which is that most of us have grown up, and I think it’s still the case for college freshmen, where the mental attitude that one takes towards something that’s written on a piece of paper or something that is said on the airwaves, the default is that it is true. We’ve been trained that if we read something in the newspaper or see it on the Internet it must be true. The probability that it is correct is not anywhere as near as high as it was at some point. We need to move to an attitude where when we see something or hear something or read something we don’t automatically assume and give it the benefit of the doubt, unless it’s coming from a certain trusted source. . . . [T]his is a huge problem, I think, because it is difficult to have the kind of democracy that we want and need when the debate often occurs at this level, where it’s just kind of bombs being thrown back and forth.

Source: Peter Orszag spoke with Christine Barbour and Gerald C. Wright on December 3, 2010.