

Forbes



[Doug Bandow](#)

[The Politics of Plunder](#)

- [My Profile](#)
- [My Headline Grabs](#)
- [My RSS Feed](#)

It's Time For A Government Shutdown

Apr. 4 2011 - 5:13 pm | 2,343 views | 0 recommendations | 2 [comments](#)

By DOUG BANDOW



Image via Wikipedia

Legislators continue to negotiate a budget deal to avoid a federal government shutdown. Most everyone in Washington assumes that the public would be angry if the bureaucrats were sent home. But a new Rasmussen poll indicates that 57% of Americans like the idea if it is the only way to get deeper budget cuts.

No doubt, the budget needs to be pared. Uncle Sam will spend about \$3.8 trillion this year. The deficit will run a record \$1.65 trillion.

But the Democratic leadership has decided to stand fast on behalf of Big (Really, Really Big) Government. The budget plan released by President Barack Obama earlier this year relied on the usual “rosy scenarios” to understate future outlays and overstate future revenues, yet still predicted that the annual deficit will remain above \$600 billion throughout the coming decade. More realistically, the red ink over that period is likely to approach \$10 trillion. Congressional Democrats are acting like there is no program, no expenditure in the entire federal Leviathan that is not essential.

Republicans have taken up the cause of the taxpayers. Of course, their conversion to the cause of fiscal responsibility came late: President George W. Bush and his GOP Congress squandered money on virtually every program known to man — and some previously unknown ones too. Republicans share the blame for today’s fiscal mess. But at least they are now using the phrase “budget cuts” in polite company.

It’s obviously hard to quickly close such a huge gap, especially since the 2011 federal fiscal year is about half over. But given the budget crisis facing America, Congress still should make a serious start.

From all of the sound and fury coming out of Washington, one would think that the two parties were arguing about something important. Presumably the GOP is proposing budget cuts of, oh, a few hundred billion dollars? No. How about a couple hundred billion dollars? No. Well, certainly at least \$100 billion? No. Think \$61 billion. And that amount — about 1.6% of federal outlays — has the Democrats in full battle cry. Imagine! Cutting federal expenditures by 1.6%! Doing so would destroy America!

It makes me wish for last year’s Snowmageddon, which closed the federal government in Washington for an unprecedented four days. Amazingly, the country staggered on without guidance and nurture from Uncle Sam. The economy continued to function, contra President Obama’s recent warnings about the impact of a government shutdown. In fact, Americans did a lot better without having to look over their shoulders those four days.

As the majority of the population recognizes, there’s no reason to fear a government shutdown this year. We have grown far too reliant on Washington. It is time to regain our independence. Even the most essential agencies waste a lot of time and money on non-essential tasks.

Start with the Defense Department. Obviously, defending America is vital, one of the few necessary tasks of government. But most of what the Pentagon does these days has nothing to do with protecting America.

Indeed, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 demonstrated that the one thing the U.S. government was unable to do was protect the American heartland. So Congress created a new agency, the Department of Homeland Security, to do what the Department of Defense failed to do.

Today most American military forces are busy doing tasks which have no recognizable connection to U.S. security. The president's Libyan adventure becomes more surreal by the day: NATO members now are threatening to bomb the rebels who Washington supports if they hurt civilians and to prosecute for past crimes defectors from the government that Washington wants to overthrow.

Combine this with the American military spending its tenth year in Afghanistan trying to create a Western-style democracy where none has existed. And U.S. forces continue to occupy Iraq, a country which the Bush administration blew up under false pretenses, killing 200,000 or more civilians.

Perhaps even dumber is subsidizing the defense of Europe, Japan, South Korea, and other populous and prosperous allies. The Europeans have a bigger GDP and population than America, but the U.S. government insists on defending them. Washington redraws national borders in the Balkans and creates alliances in Central Asia. Most of these ventures diminish U.S. security by creating geopolitical threats and liabilities.

If the Pentagon isn't going to protect us, then there's a need for something like the Department of Homeland Security. But this bizarre mix of everything from customs to immigration to disaster relief isn't very good at keeping Americans safe. Especially since Congress is most interested in passing out grants as pork and agency bureaucrats prefer to provide "security theatre" to create the illusion of safety. The best policy would be to stop making additional enemies who want to harm Americans by bombing, invading and occupying additional countries.

The Department of Veterans Affairs grows out of the Department of Defense, since the federal government has an obligation to care for those wounded in America's wars. But it would be better to integrate their care into the nation's medical system — and especially to make fewer veterans in the future by staying out of stupid and unnecessary conflicts. Yet the Afghanistan war, in particular, continues to generate casualties, creating huge future "unfunded liabilities" for the VA.

The State Department is legitimate, but much of what it does is not. Misnamed "foreign aid" traditionally takes money from poor people in rich countries and gives it to rich people in poor countries. Indeed, a lot of foreign aid has been counterproductive, discouraging authoritarian and socialist states from adopting desperately needed reforms. The Foreign Service bureaucracy could be further pared if Washington was not attempting to constantly micro-manage other societies. A Vatican-sized embassy in Baghdad is merely the worst example. The American government should have a much smaller foreign footprint.

Even the Justice Department is a dubious creature. The duty of ensuring "justice" is real, but the bureaucracy of justice — laws, police, prosecutors, courts — primarily belongs at the state and local levels. Federalization of the criminal law, under Republicans and Democrats alike, and support for social engineering, such as de facto racial quotas, have

increasingly sacrificed Americans' liberties. Much of the bureaucracy should be shut down.

The Treasury Department, or something like it, is necessary as long as Uncle Sam collects taxes and spends money. But it should do far less of both. Moreover, much of Treasury's work would be criminal if conducted by anyone else — invading taxpayers' privacy, enforcing economic sanctions, conducting financial spying.

Health and Human Services, the home of Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid, is a spending behemoth. Yet if this bureaucracy has any legitimate role, it is a small one. The principal social services safety net should be private. If government steps in, it should primarily be at the state and local level. If there's any cause for federal intervention, it should be very limited.

For instance, Social Security and Medicare are middle class welfare. Politicians have lied about the programs being social insurance in order to win political support: there are no real trust funds, individual accounts, or legal obligations to pay. Yet the programs are fiscal time bombs, with trillions of dollars in unfunded liabilities. Individuals should save their own money for retirement; retirees should buy their own health insurance. People who are poor should be helped because they are poor.

Not much else the federal government does makes much sense. The Agriculture Department is a special interest bureaucracy par excellence, enriching people because they are farmers. Why do the rest of us owe farmers a living? They work hard, but so do most other Americans. Welfare should be for poor people, not influential people. Department buildings should be sold off for condos.

The same principle applies to the Commerce Department. While some bits of the bureaucracy perform legitimate functions (such as conducting a census for legislative apportionment), most of the department's programs are forms of corporate welfare. American business should make money from customers, not steal money from taxpayers.

The analysis is similar for the Departments of Energy, Housing and Urban Development, and Interior. Most federal subsidies for energy have been the equivalent of flushing money down toilets at the DOE headquarters. Big Oil and little green like their respective subsidies, but taxpayers have gotten no benefits commensurate to their forced generosity.

HUD is a piggy bank for developers. No form of residential or commercial building goes unsubsidized. Yet the epicenter of the financial crisis was the mass of federal housing subsidies. Interior also enriches interest groups. Most of the land that it manages should be sold off. Environmentally sensitive refuges could be transferred to environmental groups.

The Transportation Department is little better. There are some legitimate interstate transportation issues, but most roads and bridges should be a state and local responsibility. Transportation bills have been among the most ostentatiously wasteful pork dispensed by Congress. There'd be little harm in leaving DOT permanently closed.

There's much more, a confusing and wasteful mix of other departments, independent agencies, and commissions. In the main they are unnecessary, duplicative, bloated, or all three. They are nothing that a legislative buzz-saw would not solve. Along with them should go excessive congressional staff. Legislators need resources to oversee the government. But if Congress was no longer attempting to run America and the world, legislators would need far fewer employees.

Rather than view a government shutdown as an unfortunate necessity to wring spending concessions, closure should be seen as good policy. Not every department and bureau should stay shuttered, but many agencies should be permanently shut. It is necessary to think the unthinkable in Washington. With Uncle Sam facing his largest deficit ever, we must begin eliminating programs now.