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Trump not balancing budget 'very quickly,' as promised on campaign trail

Dave Boyer

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For all of his tough talk about cutting spending and reducing deficits, President Trump has failed glaringly to get Congress even to make a dent in the budget.

Mr. Trump came into office saying he could balance the federal budget “very quickly,” within five years. Then, with a Republican Congress a year ago, Mr. Trump signed one of the biggest deficit-financed spending bills in history after having threatened a veto but backing down for the sake of increased defense spending.

This week, the Republican-led Senate is poised to approve a two-year budget deal that the White House negotiated with congressional Democrats, a measure that is projected to add at least \$1.7 trillion to the national debt. The House passed the bill last week with mostly Democratic support.

The \$1.37 trillion budget bill adds \$320 billion in spending beyond budget caps set in 2011.

That means Mr. Trump and Congress will have added an estimated \$4 trillion to the national debt in the president’s four years in office.

Under Mr. Trump so far, the debt has climbed from \$19.9 trillion to \$22.5 trillion, even with a strong economy. When he took office, the president predicted he would eliminate the national debt in eight years. The national debt soared under President Obama from \$10.6 trillion in January 2009 to \$19.9 trillion in January 2017.

White House acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney said on “Fox News Sunday” that the nation’s finances would be under control “if Donald Trump were in charge.”

Host Chris Wallace pointed out that Mr. Trump is president.

“But you also know your Constitution, which is that Congress spends the money,” Mr. Mulvaney said. “We have to deal with the Democrats in the House. We have to deal with Democrats in the Senate, because of the 60-vote rules. We are always going to spend more money when Democrats have that seat at the table.”

Mr. Mulvaney also said that when Republicans controlled Congress for the first two years of Mr. Trump’s presidency, Republican lawmakers “threw our budgets in the trash, as well as dead on arrival.”

Some people in the president’s camp worry that as the 2020 election approaches, this budget’s runaway spending blurs what should be one of the primary differences between the two parties. Two of the far-left liberal lawmakers whom Mr. Trump accuses of hating America, Reps.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan, liked the president's big-spending budget enough to vote for it.

Two-thirds of House Republicans voted against Mr. Trump's budget deal; all but 16 Democrats voted for it.

"Republicans have really punted on fiscal responsibility, and I think that could be a problem for them going forward," said conservative economist Stephen Moore, a White House ally. "I love what this president has done on the economy, but the fiscal record on spending has been pretty spendthrift."

National Taxpayers Union Executive Vice President Brandon Arnold called the deal "a complete abdication of fiscal responsibility." Maya MacGuineas, president of the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, said it could "end up being the worst budget agreement in our nation's history, proposed at a time when our fiscal conditions are already precarious."

The smallest annual deficit under Mr. Trump was \$665 billion deficit in fiscal 2017; this year's red ink is projected to reach \$896 billion, and it will likely top \$1 trillion next year.

Republican leaders are trying to pin the blame for the budget deal on House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, California Democrat, saying it was the price of ensuring that she cannot block the president's agenda through the 2020 election through budget riders. The deal also suspends the nation's borrowing limit for two years, drastically reducing the chances of a government shutdown.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Kentucky Republican, called it "the best we could have done in a timely divided government."

"The alternatives were much worse: a one-year [continuing resolution], a sequester, perpetual chaos," Mr. McConnell said.

He noted that "the real drivers" of escalating debt are entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security, not annual discretionary spending. About 70% of annual federal spending is on such mandatory programs.

Mr. McConnell said the debt would deepen even more rapidly if Congress approved a Medicare-for-All proposal advocated by socialist Sen. Bernard Sanders of Vermont and other liberals.

"I haven't seen the will on the [Democratic] side to face reality on this issue," Mr. McConnell told reporters last week. "We can't do this all by ourselves. We have divided government. Unified government, even then, requires bipartisan support. So, that's the real drivers of the debt."

Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer, New York Democrat, blamed the deficits on the Republican tax cuts of 2017 and said the way out of the fiscal problems is to raise taxes on the wealthy.

"The bottom line is, if you want to reduce the deficit, do it on the backs of the people who can most afford it: the wealthy, the super corporations, not on the middle class, not on the working people," Mr. Schumer said.

The president and Republican congressional leaders are pointing to higher spending on the military as a primary achievement in the budget, including \$738 billion in fiscal 2020, a 3% increase over current levels.

Mr. Moore, a columnist for The Washington Times, said settling the debt ceiling issue is “an admirable goal,” but he believes the deal is demoralizing for some in the Republican base.

“It would be better for the Republicans to show more fight and not just give Pelosi most everything she wanted in terms of her spending priorities,” he said. “It’s disappointing. We’ll see what kind of fallout there is politically from this. The grassroots folks are a little demoralized that there wasn’t more fight in the Republicans.”

Tea Party Patriots Action said the deal illustrates that “it apparently makes no difference if they are Republicans or Democrats, or even liberals or conservatives — all but those with the strongest backbones and the clearest minds are determined to avoid spending reductions.”

“Despite record-level revenue to the federal government, despite the hottest economy on the planet, not only can it not balance its books, with this deal, it will add an additional \$326 billion in deficit spending,” the group said. “If Washington will not act to reduce spending when the economy is roaring, when will it, if ever?”

But former House Speaker Newt Gingrich called the budget agreement “very good for President Trump and Republicans” because it protects national security, prevents “leftwing riders” on spending bills and avoids a government shutdown.

“This sets the stage for a big choice election in 2020,” he tweeted.

Mr. Moore said the president “should now take some steps to really try to reestablish some fiscal conservative credentials by going after the waste in the budget and using his veto pen more aggressively in terms of repealing big spending bills.”

“The problem is neither party really wants to cut spending,” Mr. Moore said in an interview. “Republicans want to spend more money on the military, and Democrats want to spend money on social programs, and we end up spending more money on both.”

It’s the kind of budget that Mr. Trump vowed in March 2018 that he would never sign again, when he complained that he was approving the second-largest spending bill in history.

“I say to Congress: I will never sign another bill like this again,” Mr. Trump said at the time. “Nobody read it. It’s only hours old.”

The president reportedly has told advisers that he will cut spending significantly in a second term. Cato Institute Executive Vice President David Boaz said Presidents Barack Obama and George W. Bush also envisioned that approach near the end of their first terms, and they also failed.

“We’ve heard this song before — spend now, raise the debt ceiling now, and then we’ll cut spending later,” he said in a blog post. “That’s why fiscal conservatives have become very skeptical of bills that promise to cut spending some day — not this year, not next year, but swear to God some time in the next 10 years. ... Cuts tomorrow and cuts in the out-years and cuts after the next election — but never cuts today.”