

Guest Columnist: How the government can save \$2 trillion

Written by

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This summer, members of Congress are threatening to shut down the federal government or block efforts to raise the limit on how much the U.S. government can borrow unless lawmakers agree on tough action to cut federal spending. With the budget deficit expanding and total debt now estimated at more than \$14 trillion, the House budget doesn't even begin to make a dent.

A serious debate about the federal government's role is long overdue.

We all need to assess what the government does well and what it does poorly. What kind of economy will be sustainable 50 years from now? And how do we expect our country will relate to the rest of the world? At our Quaker peace lobby, we believe these are moral choices about what type of society we want today and what type of country we want for our children tomorrow.

Sadly, these kinds of questions are largely missing from discussions in Washington.

Instead, the congressional schedule brims with symbolic votes about legislation that won't ever become law and policy proposals that can't possibly narrow the federal budget deficit. Threats to shut down the federal government or cap the nation's borrowing are just the latest of these pointless proposals.

Consider the House leadership's threat to shut down the federal government, ostensibly as a way to focus attention on reducing the size of the deficit. Few people would argue that the federal budget deficit should be allowed to widen indefinitely. Yet for all the talk about deficits, the House this year approved a budget, proposed by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., that would barely make a dent in the federal budget deficit. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities calculates that Ryan's budget would cut government spending by \$4.3 trillion over 10 years — and then give \$4.2 trillion of that back to the wealthy and large corporations through tax breaks. Net deficit reduction: \$155 billion.

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What the House plan does do is make choices about where to spend federal dollars. It would cut spending on the kind of diplomacy, development, and international cooperation that might help prevent future wars, while sparing the Pentagon from any real cuts. The House plan also would drastically reduce funding for successful programs that keep our elderly out of poverty, help young Americans obtain a college education and assist poor children. These choices are morally wrong and politically backward.

President Barack Obama and his allies in Congress have not done any better. The budget he presented to Congress in February would allow Pentagon spending to continue to grow, albeit at a slower rate, and proposed deep domestic spending cuts. Just like the GOP-dominated House's approach, Obama's budget would do very little to cut the budget deficit.

So what could Congress do better? The federal government could save nearly \$1 trillion by cutting the Pentagon budget during the next 10 years, according to a report prepared by a range of groups, including the Institute for Policy Studies, the libertarian Cato Institute and Taxpayers for Common Sense. Another \$1 trillion in revenue could be raised by eliminating the recently extended tax breaks for families with incomes over \$250,000 a year, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Yet neither of these proposals is getting enough consideration in Washington. Many

lawmakers fear that if they support cutting Pentagon spending or restoring taxes on the richest Americans to where they were before the Bush administration, they could be voted out of Congress. Yet support for raising taxes on the wealthy and cutting wasteful Pentagon spending is growing on both sides of the political aisle, as well as among voters, according to recent opinion polls.

Congress needs to hear that message from individual constituents. Whether you agree with me or disagree strongly, I hope you'll listen carefully to the debate in Washington and consider weighing in, either in a letter to Congress or in a letter to the editor of your local newspaper.

OtherWords columnist Jim Cason is the associate executive secretary for campaigns at Friends Committee on National Legislation, a Quaker lobby in the public interest.

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