

A crazy road to saner budgets

February 14, 2011 at 6:00 am by [Jay Jochowitz, Editorial page editor](#)

Today's editorial: Congress looks at a new and rather roundabout way to curb its penchant for spending.

So this is fiscal discipline, Washington, D.C., style: Congress may pass a bill to have Congress vote on whether to cut spending that Congress already approved, if, that is, the President suggests it.

Sadly, the way things are, this makes sense. Only Congress could force discipline on itself by requiring it to vote to be disciplined after it voted not to be.

This idea for cutting deficits that just won't quit is the latest attempt to give the president something of a line item veto power, which presidents have long sought. Ronald Reagan, who never got the power, made it part of his anti-big government mantra. Bill Clinton briefly enjoyed the authority after Congress approved it in 1996, until the Supreme Court nixed it in 1998 in a case, incidentally, brought by then-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani.

The Supreme Court ruled that the line item veto violates the Constitution, under which, it said, the president's veto is an all-or-nothing thing. Presidents can either approve bills or veto them in their entirety. They can't pick and choose portions that they like and don't like. It's part of the balance of power between the legislative and executive branches. While he had line item veto power, Mr. Clinton in 1997 cut about \$2 billion worth of spending, spread out over five years. According to the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, the cuts included some dredging projects that would have mainly benefited limited commercial interests and private yacht owners in Alaska and Mississippi, a \$1 million corporate welfare grant to a Montana Chamber of Commerce and \$900,000 for a Veterans Affairs cemetery that the VA said it didn't need.

The premise of the line item veto authority was that presidents, who are elected nationally, could, with their broader political base, take the heat for

axing spending that legislators put in the bills mainly to please constituents or special interests.

What Congress has now come up with is a bipartisan plan under which the president would have 45 days after signing a bill into law to delete non-mandatory spending. Congress would then have 10 days to approve or reject the cuts by a simple majority.

Why, you might wonder, couldn't Congress just do the right thing in the first place and not put the spending in at all? Why should we believe that it would gladly remove spending that it happily approved, just because a president, possibly one whose party isn't in power in Congress, says so?

Here's why: because now the waste would be out there for all to see, and if some people still didn't like the cuts, lawmakers would have the president to blame.

Yes, it sounds like a charade. But if that's what it takes to stop dredging for yachts, cemeteries we don't need, multibillion dollar aircraft the military doesn't want, and bridges to nowhere, we're game.