

Chicago Tribune

Forcing us to choose

Americans confront the cost of their government. Good.

March 5, 2013

On Nov. 21, 2011, the co-chairs of the so-called congressional supercommittee had their own little Appomattox. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash, and Rep. Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas, surrendered, admitting that they couldn't reach a deal to trim federal deficits by a relatively paltry \$1.2 trillion over 10 years. And so, come 2013, a strange beast called "sequester" would do the trimming. One hour later, a flummoxed President Barack Obama reacted with a prediction more wise and cunning than he could have known:

"Already some in Congress are trying to undo these automatic spending cuts. My message to them is simple — No," Obama told reporters in the White House briefing room. "I will veto any effort to get rid of those automatic spending cuts to domestic and defense spending. There will be no easy off ramps on this one."

Fifteen months of politics later, Obama has his reasons for wanting, yes, "to undo these automatic spending cuts," which began grinding into gear over the weekend. Yet there'll be, just as he predicted, no easy off ramps. Good.

What the president inexactly envisioned, and what's embryonic now, is a forced choice: How expensive a government do we Americans want to purchase with how many of our tax dollars?

As recently as 2007, our federal deficit was \$160 billion. Federal revenue plunged in the Great Recession, and federal spending in response to the recession increased sharply. Nearly four years after the recession ended, spending still hasn't retreated — the key reason our deficits have topped \$1 trillion for the last four years. Enter the sequester.

By design of Democrats and Republicans, this is the wrong sequester: It essentially spares the huge federal entitlements programs that are driving deficits and will continue to do so as baby boomers retire at the rate of 11,000 a day.

But in other respects this is an excellent exercise for the federal government and the citizens whose taxes fund it. Will we adjust to slightly lower spending and come a small step closer to making expenses match revenues, as Republicans expect? Or will we cry out to restore spending, and to raise taxes in ways that would make that possible, as Democrats expect?

Live and learn. What we do expect is a common-sense reaction that many opponents of the sequester conveniently don't share: If, say, security lines at airports lengthen, or if other side effects disturb Americans, many of them will react with a vengeance not at

some fixed group of politicians, but at the whole federal enterprise: *You people have had how long to limit government travel, and cancel conferences, and cut nonessential payroll to reduce costs by just 2 percent — and this screw-up is the best you could do?*

Already, proponents of the sequester are offering simple ways for Washington to ease its impact by eliminating redundancies (do we really need more than 80 federal programs on teacher quality?) and by applying perfectly legal ways for officials at the Pentagon and elsewhere to transfer money into crucial accounts. On Thursday, after Secretary of State John Kerry issued a celebratory press release "On the Occasion of Bulgaria's National Day," we started hoping the sequester will eliminate that sort of wasted federal labor.

Reuters reports that, adjusting for inflation, the sequester would leave defense spending over the next decade *near Cold War highs*. And the Cato Institute's Michael Tanner says domestic discretionary spending, also adjusted for inflation, falls to roughly the same level as in 2009: "You recall 2009, don't you?" he wrote last week. "The starvation, the mass closure of our schools, the shutdown of the transportation system, the burning cities?"

Sequester opponents, meanwhile, have been flat-footed. When Senate Democrats proposed a bill to forestall the sequester, the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimated that the bill would increase revenue by \$55.1 billion over 10 years, yet would raise expenditures by \$62.4 billion. That's right, this substitute way to cut federal deficits would ... add more than \$7 billion to federal deficits.

Embarrassing, but not a mortal sin. This business of economizing, of reducing the government's growth, of *making choices* on what to spend where, is new for members of Congress from both parties.

For Americans who in recent years have endured far more drastic cuts to their household spending, the sequester looks like what it is: a hardship for some, an inconvenience to many — and a long overdue move toward forcing a gravely indebted Washington to spend no more money than it collects.

Forcing all of us, that is, to choose how expensive a government we want to purchase with how many of our tax dollars.