

The Right's Painfully Stupid Approach To Budget-Cutting

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If you've been reading conservative columnists lately, you might think balancing the budget via spending cuts is easy. That's what they keep telling us, anyway. Under the headline "Look, It's Easy to Whittle the Budget Down," for example, Donald Lambro [writes](#):

There are lots of places where spending can be cut and billions saved. Among them:

-- Federal aid to the states: A study by budget analyst Chris Edwards at the Cato Institute found there are 1,122 aid-to-state programs, or "72 percent more programs than just a decade ago." "For lawmakers looking for places to cut, the \$650 billion federal-aid empire would be a good place to start," he says.

...

-- Cut the government's travel budget to half of its level. Savings: \$5.8 billion.

See? Easy! Except that Lambro doesn't write a word about about the consequences of slashing federal aid to the states -- what effect it would have on state budgets, on public services, on the economy, etc. And he doesn't write a word about what cutting the government travel budget in half would mean -- what wouldn't get done as a result, or what other costs would be incurred. He gives no indication that he has *any idea* what the "government's travel budget" pays for. (No, "travel" is not an answer, any more than "dinner" is an answer to the question "what did you have for dinner?") He just wants to cut it.

[John Stossel](#), under the header "I can balance the budget" also pretends budget-cutting is easy: "[E]liminate the U.S. Education Department. We'd save \$94 billion. Federal involvement doesn't improve education. It gets in the way. ... We should also eliminate Housing and Urban Development. That's \$53 billion more. Who needs the Energy Department and its \$20 billion sinkhole?"

Stossel may think that's a rhetorical question, but it isn't. In addition to little things like [cleaning up radioactive waste](#) and [funding and conducting important scientific research](#), the DOE plays a rather significant [national security role](#). How will radioactive waste get cleaned up in John Stossel's DOE-free world? How will students pay for college without the financial aid that disappears when Stossel eliminates the Department of Education?

As an opinion columnist, Stossel is of course under no obligation to have answers to those questions that I find satisfactory. But he gives no indication that he's even *considered* them, just as Lambro gives no indication that he has any idea what it means to cut travel spending, or what effects slashing aid to states would have on state budgets and the economy.

Yes, cutting the budget is easy if you *completely ignore the consequences of doing so*. But that isn't a rational approach to budgeting. Families struggling to make ends meet don't simply announce "we'll just spend half as much on food and transportation" and think they've solved their problem. They consider whether it's even *possible* to cut their

grocery budget in half without starving or dooming their children to malnourishment. They consider whether it's possible to cut their transportation budget in half and still make it to and from work. And whether adding an additional hour to their daily commute will actually save money once they factor in the increased daycare expenses that will result.

But the "it's easy to cut government spending" crowd doesn't bother thinking things through like that. They just Google the Department of Education's total budget, say we should eliminate it, then wonder why people think balancing the budget is difficult.

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