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Welcome proposed budget cuts target wasteful programs

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President Trump dug deeply into the federal budget this week and proposed abolishing or cutting a lot of wasteful, needless agencies and programs.

“We are going to do more with less, and make the government lean and accountable to the people,” Trump said, as he sent his budget-cutting plan to the Republican-run Congress.

Lawmakers have their work cut out for them, but don’t expect them to eliminate many, if any, major programs as Trump has proposed.

That is unfortunate because so many programs are not only waste-ridden, but hopelessly ineffective as well. That is what I found in a career of investigative reporting on the wasteful spending beat that led to several books, including “The Federal Rathole” and “Fat City — How Washington Wastes Your Taxes,” which President Reagan passed out to his top officials at his first Cabinet meeting in 1981.

Reagan made a bold attempt to cut government down to size, and his budget director, David Stockman, tried to zero out a bunch of programs, but without much success.

The monstrous federal budget is an incredibly complex document that has plunged our nation so deeply into debt that it has become a fourth-stage cancer threatening to undermine our country’s economic foundations.

Spending in this fiscal year is headed to an astounding \$4 trillion. Revenues are estimated at \$3.4 trillion, and the budget deficit is likely to be around \$560 billion.

That means going into the bond market to make up the difference. The government’s debt is projected to climb to nearly \$15 trillion by the end of this fiscal year, a mountain of red ink that will be passed on to future generations over many decades to come. This is the irresponsible spending mess that President Obama left behind, as well as some of his predecessors.

Trump titled his first budget blueprint the “America First Budget,” and it won rave reviews from conservative think tanks.

The Heritage Foundation’s Romina Boccia said his proposed budget “marks a stark contrast from the reckless spending of the past administration.” The “proposed cuts to non-defense programs, together with executive actions to streamline federal agencies and cut waste, signal that this administration is serious about cutting the bloated Washington bureaucracy down to size.”

But the Cato Institute's veteran budget analyst, Chris Edwards, said, "Many of Trump's proposals will not be greeted warmly on Capitol Hill."

That's because "the \$54 billion in non-defense cuts he put forth are matched by \$54 billion in defense spending increases. So that focus on 'lean' does not extend to the Pentagon, and there is no overall spending reduction to help get rising deficits under control," Edwards points out.

As for Trump's domestic spending cuts, Edwards predicts that many "members of both parties (will) defend subsidy programs that aid their states."

"Still, the broad sweep of Trump's proposals gives him a strong starting position in budget negotiations. Since he dishes out the pain widely, his cuts will be perceived as being fair, at least by Republican voters."

And Edwards further notes that "for fiscal conservatives, there is good news here." For example, he points to Trump's proposal to eliminate Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and the Economic Development Administration (EDA), programs that pump billions of tax dollars to subsidize business deals and public works projects, and, supposedly, create jobs.

They're intended to help areas of high unemployment, but past investigations showed that the grants all too often went to wealthier communities. Moreover, follow-up studies found that, in many cases, unemployment was worse just a few years later.

Many of the agencies that Trump is targeting are in "Fat City": the EDA, CDBG, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and Amtrak, among others.

I went after 100 unnecessary agencies, programs and expenditures, from the congressional gymnasiums to the heavily politicized Urban Development Action Grants and the Highway Beautification Program. Some of them are gone, but many more remain, dishing out billions of America's hard-earned tax dollars.

Now the budget-balancing challenges are once again in Congress' court. But lawmakers shouldn't let the Pentagon off the hook, either. Close the top-brass dining rooms. Shut down outmoded, inefficient, century-old military bases that serve no strategic purpose, and renegotiate bloated contracts.

Federal spending is wildly out of control, and as Trump's budget makes crystal clear, this time it's no more Mr. Nice Guy.