

I Survived Sequestration

As usual, the doomsday predictions about lower government spending haven't come true.

By: Michael Tanner – April 3, 2013

This week marks the one-month anniversary of one of the most terrifying events in American history: the sequester. So, with great trepidation, I have climbed out of my bunker to survey the devastation and send off this column.

I was shocked to discover that somehow mankind had survived. Government spending had been cut, or at least the rate of growth had been slowed, yet everywhere I looked people were going about their daily lives as if nothing had happened. There has been no outbreak of diseases from tainted, uninspected meat. Airplanes have not fallen from the sky; indeed, they continue landing and taking off more or less on schedule. The American military is still conducting operations around the world, in countries both important and obscure. Al-Qaeda has not established the caliphate in Kabul, let alone New York. Mass starvation had been held at bay, for the time being.

Several federal agencies were forced to impose hiring freezes, but the federal government is hardly closing its employment business. In just one week last month, nearly 4,600 job listings were posted on USAJobs.gov, the federal government's recruiting site. These include, according to Senator Tom Coburn, a counsel for the Morris K. Udall Scholarship Foundation with a salary of up to \$155,000, a director for the Air Force History and Museums Policies and Programs with a salary of up to \$165,300, law librarians at the Justice Department with salaries reaching \$115,742, a Department of Labor assistant to answer phones at a salary of up to \$81,204, four public-affairs specialists earning up to \$116,000, and 23 recreation aides.

There has been some real pain, of course, depending on where you look. The White House cancelled some public tours. The National Archives was forced to return to the hours of operation it maintained prior to 2008. Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz's staff apparently could no longer afford "high quality" meals in the Capitol cafeteria. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) released thousands of undocumented immigrants from detention centers — wait, actually, that happened before the sequester started. Meanwhile, some federal officials continue to warn that *eventually* terrible things really will happen.

The dreaded furloughs of federal workers have turned out to be less than advertised. The Continuing Resolution passed by Congress a couple of weeks ago provided federal agencies with additional flexibility to prioritize spending and avoid staff cuts. For example, the Department of Agriculture was able to reallocate \$55 million from other parts of its budget to the agency's Food Safety and Inspection Service, meaning that inspectors haven't faced furloughs and meat remains generally edible. Likewise, the border patrol, corrections agencies, and the federal weather service have all avoided furloughing workers. While the Defense Department was not able to avoid furloughs

completely, it has reduced the length of expected furloughs from 22 days to 14, and will perhaps reduce the furloughs to even fewer days.

For a time, the Obama administration tried to find appropriate horror stories, but with a notable lack of success . . . and disregard for the truth. School systems in West Virginia did not actually send out thousands of pink slips to teachers, janitors in the Capitol didn't lose their jobs, and so on. After a string of Pinocchios from independent fact checkers, the administration seems to have gone silent.

I admit, I was perplexed. How had the world avoided devastation? Sure, this was a pretty small cut in spending, less than three cents out of every dollar the federal government spends (less, actually, because nearly half the "cuts" actually occur in future years, but are counted, with typical Washington budgetary legerdemain, this year). But weren't we sure that any attempt to reduce government spending would return us to the Dark Ages?

But we should have known: This is far from the first time that spending advocates have cried wolf. One can go all the way back to Bill Clinton's welfare reform, which, it was solemnly predicted, would throw 2.7 million more children into poverty. Instead, poverty, child poverty, and African American-child poverty all declined after the law was passed.

But it is a given that the next time Congress proposes to cut spending — or even hesitates to increase it — we will again hear tales of woe and impending disaster. We should all bear in mind, then, that we made it past the Ides of March this year, sequester and all.