

## How Serious Are Republicans?

*They seem to have a lot of reasons they're not going to cut spending.*

By: Michael Tanner – May 1, 2013

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Shortly after President Obama finally released his proposed budget a couple weeks ago, Representative Greg Walden of Oregon, the chairman of the National Republican Campaign Committee, launched a stinging attack on the president not over the president's call for more taxes and spending or because the president's budget never balances and adds trillions to the national debt, but because the president actually proposed modestly slower growth in Social Security benefits. A "shocking attack on seniors," Representative Walden called it, accusing the president of "trying to balance this budget on the backs of seniors."

It is true that the president's proposal for "chained CPI" is not immune from criticism. It is likely to save far less than advertised — certainly not enough to deal with our massive and growing debt — and it would mean a huge tax middle-class tax hike over time, as workers were pushed into higher tax brackets more quickly. But that's not what Walden said.

This could be viewed as just another example of Representative Walden's penchant for being a big-spending Republican. (He has a lifetime score of just 62 percent from the anti-spending Club for Growth.) Or perhaps it was just reflexive and mindless partisanship. Anything President Obama proposes, Republicans must oppose (and vice versa, of course).

But in many ways, Walden's remarks illustrate a problem with the current Republican party as a whole. Too many Republicans don't really want to cut spending — or, at least, not spending that benefits their own constituencies.

Recall that during last year's presidential campaign, Mitt Romney's big complaint about Obamacare was that it cut \$716 billion from Medicare over ten years. Medicare is facing a minimum of \$42 trillion in future red ink. Perhaps someone should be praised for cutting it. It would have made sense to criticize the president for spending those savings on other aspects of Obamacare. One could certainly question whether the president's proposed cuts were the best way to reduce Medicare spending, or even whether they would be effective. But Governor Romney focused his criticism on the idea of the cuts themselves.

Elsewhere, Republicans continue to resist any efforts to reduce defense spending. Modest defense cuts were included in the sequester of course — over the strenuous objections of GOP hawks such as John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Representative Buck McKeon. But advocates of increased defense spending have hardly given up the fight — expect continued efforts this fall to undo the sequester's effects on the Pentagon.

There is also some parochialism: attempting to funnel federal money to one's district at the expense of the broader public purse. Thus Representative Steve Stockman of Texas opposes cuts to NASA (invoking the specter of an asteroid crashing into Earth), and Representative Jim Jordan pushes the army to buy Abrams tanks, built in his home state of Ohio, it says it doesn't need. Republican senators from farm states are among the biggest defenders of farm subsidies. Representatives from the northeast demanded federal assistance after Hurricane Sandy. And so on.

More of it is just political cowardice, out of fear of cutting something that might offend some voter, somewhere. Notice how quickly the FAA's sequester issues were resolved once potential voters (and campaign donors) squawked. The furloughs of air-traffic controllers were unnecessary, resulting from union contract issues and the deliberate decision of the Obama administration to make the sequester as painful as possible, and should have been fixed. But it's clear that Republicans moved so fast in part because it was largely upper-middle-class voters who were affected.

#page# Similar meekness is pushing other Republicans to suggest that the party should move away from "austerity" to support a "growth agenda." House majority leader Eric Cantor, for example, has expressed a desire to "focus on what lies beyond these fiscal debates." And, Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal exhorts Republicans, "We seem to have an obsession with government bookkeeping. . . . We as Republicans have to accept that government number-crunching — even conservative number-crunching — is not the answer to our nation's problems."

But can we really expect an economy to grow with a federal government that, according to the Congressional Budget Office, will consume 43 percent of GDP by mid-century? Can we have economic growth with a national debt in excess of 104 percent of GDP and total liabilities, including unfunded obligations, approaching 800 percent of GDP?

Republicans like to pretend that you can deal with the debt crisis by eliminating "waste, fraud, and abuse" in the federal budget, and certainly there is plenty of that. But you simply cannot balance the budget by cutting the usual suspects. Foreign aid amounts to just 1 percent of federal spending. Federal subsidies to Planned Parenthood and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting amount to a combined 0.02 percent.

In fact, all domestic discretionary spending — everything from the Department of Education to the FBI, from NASA to the Food and Drug Administration — accounts for just 16 percent of all federal spending. And that percentage is declining. The president proudly, and correctly, points out that even in his bloated budget, domestic discretionary spending will amount to just 2.5 percent of GDP by 2023, a historic low.

That is not to say we shouldn't cut those programs. Many are indeed wasteful. Some do more harm than good. Most would probably be better left to the private sector and civil society. Every dollar in savings is a good thing, but you're not going to balance the budget this way.

Defense currently constitutes another 20 percent of federal spending. And the really big money resides in entitlement programs, especially Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security, which account for 44 percent (and counting) of all federal spending. Another six cents out every dollar that the federal government spends is for interest on our

current federal debt. That, unfortunately, is one area of government that cannot be reduced by legislative action, at least in the short term.

It is easy to cut spending that you don't like. But if Republicans are serious about cutting spending, lowering our debt, and reducing the size of government, they are going to have to cut spending that they like. They are going to have to make cuts that affect their districts and their constituents. They are going to have to accept cuts in defense. And, they are going to have to structurally reform entitlements, even at the risk of angering seniors.

That might make you ask: Are Republicans really serious about cutting spending?