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Mini-bus Deception

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I was sorry to read in Congressional Quarterly this morning that the so-called “mini-bus” spending bill that went through the Senate yesterday was “largely non-controversial.” The \$128 billion bill does reflect the discretionary spending levels set in the August-enacted law to raise the debt ceiling. However, even taken at face value, it is a mediocre achievement, since it only cuts \$1 billion over last year’s \$129 billion level.

Unfortunately, it’s worse than it looks. Numbers from the Senate Budget Committee Republican staff, led by Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) who tried to whip his colleagues to oppose the bill, show that spending will be \$10 billion higher than last year, thanks to a variety of gimmicks used to hide the spending. For instance, remember the \$11.3 billion allowance for disaster spending? Well, that doesn’t count toward the Budget Control Act (BCA) FY12 discretionary-spending cap of \$1.043 trillion. Of that amount, some \$3.2 billion could be spent in the minibus, which would lead to an increase in FY12 discretionary spending. And of course, there is more, and there will be more.

I am curious to see which Republicans will actually vote against this bill.

Speaking of votes, yesterday Tad DeHaven of the Cato Institute pointed out another depressing fact about the lack of commitment to fiscal responsibility in Washington. He wrote:

An amendment to a Senate appropriations bill introduced by Sen. Tom Coburn (R-OK) that would have reduced funding for rural development subsidies at the Department of Agriculture by \$1 billion was easily voted down today. Only 13 Republicans voted to cut the program. Thirty-two Republicans joined all Democrats in voting to spare it, including minority leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), ranking budget committee member Jeff Sessions (R-AL), and tea party favorite Marco Rubio (R-FL).

This was a business-as-usual vote that will receive virtually no media attention. However, it is a vote that symbolizes just how unserious most policymakers are when it comes to making specific spending cuts. That’s to be expected with the Democrats. On the other hand, Republicans generally talk a good game about the need to cut spending and they rarely miss an opportunity to criticize the Obama administration for its reckless profligacy. Republicans instead fall back on their support of a Balanced Budget Amendment and other reforms like biennial budgeting.

I hate to say it, but this is why I continue to distrust Republicans. It's one thing to hold the line on raising taxes — which, I would argue, is actually the easy part — but it's another to actually do what needs to be done and cut spending.

Update: This is a good moment to mention what Dan Mitchell over at International Liberty modestly calls the Mitchell's Golden Rule of fiscal policy, which in its simplest version reads like this: The private sector should always grow faster than the government