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Ryan a big government conservative

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Having suffered through four years of a Democratic administration reeking of collectivism and disdain for private initiative, Ryan might seem like a breath of fresh air to the smaller-government crowd. Unlike the average member of Congress, Ryan actually puts some thought into his policy prescriptions. And Ryan recognizes that unsustainable entitlement spending is driving our long-term fiscal problems and has actually attempted to do something about it. While those are positive qualities, policymakers have set the bar so low that it's possible to make more of these attributes than is warranted.

So what if Paul Ryan was delving into the federal budget when he was still in high school? I didn't peek at a federal budget until I was out of college. Yet there is no way I would have cast the votes in Congress that Ryan has through the years. Ryan voted for TARP, the auto bailouts, No Child Left Behind, the Medicare prescription drug benefit, the Bush stimulus, the Patriot Act, and military adventurism abroad. No policymaker is perfect, but no one with a libertarian bone in their body could have supported these policies.

In fact, for all the talk about Ryan the policy wonk, he's still a politician through and through. Ryan might not have supported Obama's stimulus package, but that didn't stop him from sending letters to Energy Secretary Steven Chu asking for taxpayer handouts to organizations back in his district. Apologists will argue that he was just taking care of his constituents, which is his job. If you're going to accept that excuse then don't complain about the inability of Congress to get spending under control.

But let's set aside Ryan's decidedly big-government voting record and his willingness to grovel for taxpayer handouts. The federal budget's unsustainable trajectory is arguably the paramount issue facing the nation. Ryan has cultivated a reputation as a budget guru and his selection as Romney's running mate ensures that fiscal policy will be at the forefront of the campaign. Ideally, that would set the stage for a badly needed public debate on the size and — more importantly — the scope of government. Unfortunately, it's probably not going to happen and here's why.

Democrats and the left have already wasted no time in pillorying Ryan as a heartless ideologue who wants to balance the budget on the backs of the poor and downtrodden. Among the accusations being lobbed at Ryan are that he would destroy the middle class, starve the poor, and sacrifice a calf to Ayn Rand

on the White House lawn. I made that last one up, but the point is that Ryan's presence on the ticket is going to generate hysterics of epic proportions from the left.

While I'm more than sympathetic to criticism that Ryan wants to bolster the warfare state at the expense of the welfare state, the notion that he wishes to tear down the federal government's so-called social safety net is utter nonsense. The latest version of Ryan's "Pathway to Prosperity" budget plan merely tinkers with the federal welfare state. Yes, Ryan's idea to turn food stamps, Medicaid, and other entitlement programs into block grants to the states could save money. Yes, transforming Medicare from the current fee-for-service program to a premium-support model might be more efficient. But regardless of what one thinks of these ideas, their implementation would do virtually nothing to limit the scope of the federal government's activities.

Ryan's ideas would hopefully decrease the size of government by reducing otherwise higher levels of federal spending. But promises to reduce spending in the future don't mean a lot when you have a federal government that has the ability to spend money on pretty much anything it wants. And under Ryan's plan, the federal government would be able to continue spending money on pretty much anything it wants. For example, whereas a budget proposal from Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) would eliminate entire departments, Ryan would leave the bureaucratic monstrosity we have now intact. While Paul doesn't leave the military's bloated budget unscathed, my colleague Christopher Preble notes that Ryan wants to spend more than we did during much of the Cold War.

What this all means is that with Paul Ryan on the ticket, the left and the right will spend the rest of the campaign arguing over how much money the federal government should spend, where it should be spent, and how it should be paid for. Sadly, the question of whether the federal government should continue spending any money on particular activities will likely fall by the wayside. That means that those of us who believe that the federal government should be dramatically downsized don't have a dog in this fight.