

# Spending Debate Creates an Opportunity for Romney

By **Jonah Goldberg**

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Here's a simple suggestion for Mitt Romney: Admit that the Democrats have a point.

Right before the Memorial Day weekend, Washington was consumed by a debate over how much Barack Obama has spent as president, and it looks like it's picking up again.

Romney says that he'll "lead us out of this debt and spending inferno" ignited by Obama.

The president's defenders say, in effect, "What inferno?" White House Press Secretary Jay Carney scolded reporters last week not to "buy into the b.s. that you hear about spending and fiscal constraint with regard to this administration. I think doing so is a sign of sloth and laziness."

To back up his claim, Carney cited the work of MarketWatch columnist Rex Nutting, who wrote that, "There has been no huge increase in spending under the current president, despite what you hear."

Nutting's math is, at minimum, debatable. He puts all of the spending of the first nine months of 2009 in George W. Bush's column, despite the fact that Obama was president. Even Obama's massive stimulus program is mostly attributed to Bush-era spending. Meanwhile, the Troubled Asset Relief Program that was launched by Bush (and supported by Obama), artificially boosted spending at the end of Bush's term, inflating "base spending." Obama took what was supposed to be a one-time emergency expenditure and made it part of the new normal. Factor out TARP and the bailouts, and Obama comes in second to Lyndon Johnson in terms of spending, according to the Cato Institute's Dan Mitchell.

In a more conventional analysis, the Congressional Budget Office says that total federal spending in 2008 was \$2.98 trillion and has gone up each year to \$3.72 trillion in Obama's fiscal 2013 budget.

Another way to look at it: Until Obama became president, federal spending never exceeded 23.5 percent of GDP. The average for the Bush years was 20.5 percent. In 2009, spending broke 25 percent, and it has stayed above 23.5 percent for Obama's entire presidency.

Also, what's not in dispute is that the federal debt has soared under Obama. As the editors of the Wall Street Journal recently noted, "Mr. Obama can fairly blame \$1 trillion or so of the \$5 trillion debt increase of the last four years on Mr. Bush. But what about the other \$4 trillion? Debt held by the public now stands at 74.2 percent of the economy, up from 40.5 percent at the end of 2008 -- and rising rapidly."

But all of these numbers are a sideshow: Republicans in Washington helped create the problem, and Romney should concede the point.

Focused on fighting a war, Bush -- never a tightwad to begin with -- handed the keys to the Treasury to Tom DeLay and Denny Hastert, and they spent enough money to burn a wet mule. On Bush's watch, education spending more than doubled, the government enacted the biggest expansion in entitlements since the Great Society (Medicare Part D), and we created a vast new government agency (the Department of Homeland Security).

And yet, to listen to Obama and his allies, the Bush years were a time of "market fundamentalism" and government inaction. That's in part because when it comes to domestic policy, Democrats will always want to spend more than Republicans, so Republicans are always branded as mean-spiritedly frugal by comparison.

Nearly every problem with spending and debt associated with the Bush years was made far worse under Obama. The man campaigned as an outsider who was going to change course before we went over a fiscal cliff. Instead, when he got behind the wheel, as it were, he hit the gas instead of the brakes -- and yet has the temerity to claim that all of the forward momentum is Bush's fault.

Worse, the current obsession with "compromise" in Washington boils down to the argument that Republicans should revert back to being part of the problem, enabling Obama to "invest" even more money in his pet schemes.

Romney is under no obligation to defend the Republican performance during the Bush years. Indeed, if he's serious about fixing what's wrong with Washington, he has an obligation not to defend it. This is an argument that the Tea Party -- which famously dealt Obama's party a shellacking in 2010 -- and independents alike are entirely open to. Voters don't want a president to rein in runaway Democratic spending; they want one to rein in runaway Washington spending.

Let Obama play the partisan blame game. He's the partisan insider this time. The role of bipartisan outsider is Romney's for the taking.

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