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Deal slashes little in federal government

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Last Modified: Aug 3, 2011 02:15AM

Two weeks ago, the New York Times reported that Republicans “want a vastly smaller government.” Last week, the Times called the dispute about raising the federal debt ceiling “an epic clash over the parties’ divergent views on the size and role of the federal government.” This week, it said President Obama faces “a conservative movement seeking a wholesale redefinition of the proper role of government.”

The recent debt deal, widely portrayed as a victory for Republicans, suggests their goals are decidedly less ambitious. As always in Washington, the “epic clash” perceived by the Times is in fact a squabble between two parties that both favor big government.

The debt deal, which authorizes the federal government to borrow another \$2.1 trillion on top of the \$14.3 trillion it already owes, supposedly includes “\$2.5 trillion in cuts.” But as Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) emphasizes, those are cuts from a projected baseline in which the national debt grows by \$10 trillion during the next decade, which means “the best-case scenario is still \$7 trillion more in debt over the next 10 years.”

Paul also notes that the vast majority of the “cuts” are not scheduled to take effect for years, raising serious doubts about whether they will happen at all. “Why do we believe that the goal of \$2.5 trillion over 10 years . . . will ever be met,” he asks, “if the first two years’ cuts are \$20 billion and \$50 billion?”

Well, you might say, the debt deal is only the first step. But even at their boldest, House Republicans do not envision a federal government any smaller than it is now. Under the supposedly radical budget plan approved by the House in April, Cato Institute budget analyst Chris Edwards calculates, federal spending would rise by 34 percent during the next decade, compared to the 55 percent preferred by President Obama. The budget would not be balanced until 2030, while the role of the federal government would be essentially unchanged.

One of that plan’s weaknesses is that it does not address the so-called defense budget, which has nearly doubled in the last decade and represents more than two-fifths of the world’s military spending. This absurd situation cries out for critical examination by a party that supposedly wants a smaller government. Yet the squeals of protest elicited by the debt deal’s “security-related” cuts suggest Republicans are not ready to reconcile this country’s military spending with the threats it faces.

The deal’s initial caps, Cato’s Christopher Preble notes, would reduce total security spending in fiscal year 2012 by \$5 billion below the current level, a decrease of less than 1 percent. The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank avowedly dedicated to fiscal restraint, claims this tiny cut amounts to “gutting national security resources.”

In the second stage of the plan, if Congress fails to approve at least \$1.2 trillion in savings proposed by a special bipartisan committee, automatic cuts would take \$500 billion from the Pentagon budget over 10 years. That's a cut of less than 10 percent from current spending. We could easily afford to cut much more than that if the United States stopped getting involved in unnecessary wars and stopped defending rich countries that are perfectly capable of defending themselves.

But according to Heritage, this 10 percent cut “would compromise our nation’s security.” Rep. Allen West, (R-Fla.) called it “incredible” and “unconscionable.” If the cut takes effect, Rep. Randy Forbes (R-Va.) warned, “they’ll have to have a new strategy for how they defend the United States of America.” They might even decide to focus on defending the United States instead of policing the world. Unthinkable!

During the negotiations over raising the debt limit, Obama kept saying he wanted a “balanced” approach, by which he meant higher taxes coupled with cuts in projected spending. The debt deal, for all its flaws, could point the way to a different sort of balance, one that involves cutting programs Republicans like along with programs Democrats like.

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