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You Cannot Be Serious

Posted By [Charles V. Peña](#) On April 14, 2011 @ 11:00 pm In [Uncategorized](#) | [2 Comments](#)

Touting a plan to reduce federal government spending by nearly [\\$39 billion](#) for the remainder of fiscal year 2011, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-KY) triumphantly claimed, "My committee went line-by-line through agency budgets this weekend to negotiate and craft deep but responsible reductions in virtually all areas of government." According to Rogers, "Our bill targets wasteful and duplicative spending, makes strides to rein in out-of-control federal bureaucracies, and will help bring our nation one step closer to eliminating our job-crushing level of debt."

To begin, President Obama's [original proposed budget](#) (submitted in February 2010) was a whopping \$3.8 trillion! So \$39 billion represents about 1 percent. So while a sizeable portion of Bill Gates' net worth (estimated at \$56 billion and [number two in the world](#)), not much in terms of total federal spending. However, \$2.1 trillion of federal spending is for mandatory programs (things like Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and – now, in the age of "too big to fail" – TARP). So \$39 billion is more like 2 percent of \$1.7 trillion of discretionary spending (still not much).

So all the talk about "eliminating our job-crushing level of debt" is a lot of sound and fury signifying nothing.

But it gets worse. [According to the Wall Street Journal](#): The main exception was the Defense Department, which wound up with a \$5 billion increase from previous levels, leaving it with \$513 billion (which does not include more than \$150 billion for military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan).

In the words of John McEnroe (probably my all-time favorite tennis player): [You cannot be serious!](#)

The Defense Department accounts for nearly one-third of total discretionary spending. To believe that significant reductions in rampant federal spending can be made while leaving defense spending untouched is to believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy. The \$39 billion in cuts to the rest of the federal government that Hal Rogers and other Republicans are crowing about is less than 10 percent of the defense budget. Despite going line-by-line through each department and agency, Rogers' committee couldn't find another \$39 billion that the Defense Department could do without? Instead, adding \$5 billion is their idea of reigning in an out-of-control federal bureaucracy?

As my 11-year old daughter says: Really?

[According to Winslow Wheeler](#), director of the Straus Military Reform Project, "Budget reductions on the order of 10 percent per year for several years into the future can make us stronger, not weaker." Larry Korb (an assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration) and Laura Conley at the Center for American Progress outlined a series of options that would result in \$85-\$255 billion in defense spending reductions and recommended specific cuts of more than [\\$100 billion](#). The Sustainable Defense Task Force identified [nearly \\$1 trillion](#) in Pentagon budget savings over ten years. And my former Cato Institute colleague, Chris Preble (along with Benjamin Friedman) [found \\$1.2 trillion to trim](#) over 10 years. So how is it that all these people (just to name a few) could find ways to reduce the defense budget, but Congressman Rogers and his ilk can't?

The only plausible answer is that they're disingenuous about reducing federal government spending. Leaving aside the difficult issue of trying to reduce so-called entitlement spending (a little more than half the federal budget), the only way to make a dent in the rest of federal spending is to include paring down the Defense Department since it comprises the bulk of discretionary spending. Otherwise, you cannot be serious.

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