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The Budget Dodgers

Few GOP presidential candidates have outlined detailed budget cuts.

If you listen to much of the mainstream media, you can be forgiven for believing that the Republican 2012 presidential field is made up of right-wing fanatics eager to slash government to the bone. But the reality is that, so far, there have been very few specific calls for budget cutting.

It's early, of course. But that hasn't prevented candidates or would-be candidates from coming out for *more* spending on things such as defense and farm subsidies. When it comes to restraining the size, cost, and intrusiveness of government, the field gets remarkably timid.

Take, for example, their positions on Rep. Paul Ryan's plan to reform Medicare. Everyone understands that entitlement reform is key to controlling the federal debt and spending. Medicare, depending on which set of assumptions you accept, is from \$40 trillion to \$90 trillion in the red going forward. One would think that support for Ryan's plan (or something comparable) would be the price of entry for serious presidential contenders.

But most of the candidates are having a remarkably difficult time explaining where they stand on the issue.

Newt Gingrich set off a media firestorm when he denounced the Ryan plan as "right-wing social engineering." Soon in damage control, he quickly put out a statement praising Ryan for "trying to save both Medicare and America from fiscal collapse." So what is Newt's position on Medicare now? Well, according to a spokesman, he favors "a privatized voucher system along the lines of Ryan's." Terrific. But, also according to a spokesman, Gingrich favors "maintaining a traditional Medicare system as well." Clear?

Tim Pawlenty agreed that he would sign Ryan's budget into law if he were president. Does that mean, then, that he supports the Ryan plan? Well, yes, if it were a choice between "Ryan's plan or doing nothing." Well, no, because Pawlenty will have his own Medicare plan, which will be "similar" to Ryan's plan, but also "different." That's fair, as far as it goes. Presidential