

# MICHAEL TANNER

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## There Is No Alternative

The Democrats still cannot produce a budget or a detailed deficit-reduction plan.

**P**resident Obama has now announced that he will veto the “Cut, Cap, and Balance” bill to raise the federal debt ceiling that passed the House of Representatives yesterday. In its place, the president offers . . . nothing.

With the clock ticking down toward what the administration calls “fiscal Armageddon,” the president still has not put an actual plan for increasing the debt ceiling on the table. True, he has held innumerable press conferences and briefings at which he has declared his willingness to compromise and “make difficult choices,” and even angered his own base by suggesting entitlement reform. But when it comes to actually spelling out what those compromises, choices, and reforms would be, the president is suddenly absent.

Take his most recent press conference. The president was asked which Medicare reforms he supported. There’s lots of options on the table, the president responded. Well, yes, but which options does he support? There’s lots of options on the table, he says again.

One option that’s not on the table is anything that looks like Paul Ryan’s Medicare reform proposal, which was part of the 2012 budget that already has passed the House. Here we see the pattern again. The House has passed a budget. The president doesn’t like it. The president’s alternative? He doesn’t have one.

The president did announce a budget back in February, but he has since disavowed it, and the Senate voted against it 97–0. The president also delivered a budget speech in May. But as the director of the Congressional Budget Office noted, “We don’t score speeches.” The president still has not submitted a new budget proposal to Congress.

Of course, he’s in good company. Senate Democrats haven’t produced a budget in two years. This year, in fact, for the first time in memory, even the Senate Budget Committee couldn’t come up with a budget proposal. After all, time spent proposing a budget is time that can’t be spent denouncing Republican “intransigence” for standing in the way of a deal.

Even if we don’t know what the president is for, we certainly know what he is against. And when it

comes to “Cut, Cap, and Balance,” that’s just about everything.

The House Republican plan is surprisingly moderate. First, it would impose \$1.5 trillion in budget cuts over the next ten years. That’s less than the federal government will borrow this year. Second, it would cap federal spending at 19.9 percent of GDP by 2020. That would still allow the federal government to spend 1.5 percent of GDP more than it did when Bill Clinton was president. And, finally, it would send a constitutional balanced-budget amendment to the states for consideration. The amendment would require that the federal government live within its means except during times of war or when supermajorities waive its provisions. In many ways, it is less strict than the balanced-budget provisions in place in every state except Vermont. In fact, the Republican proposal doesn’t even amend the Constitution by itself; that would still require 38 states to approve it.

But the president will have none of that. He opposes a balanced-budget amendment because it would “deprive policymakers of the flexibility they need to govern.” In other words, it would require less spending.

Of course it follows that the president also opposes the “cap” part of “Cut, Cap, and Balance,” because it “could result in significant cuts to education, research and development, and other programs critical to growing our economy and winning the future.” In other words, it would require less spending.

And the president doesn’t like the spending cuts either. They would “undercut the federal government’s ability to meet its core commitments to seniors, middle-class families, and the most vulnerable, while reducing our ability to invest in our future.” In other words, they would require . . . you get the idea.

Maybe we do know what the president is for. He wants to spend more. He wants tax hikes in order to pay for that additional spending. And, to borrow a phrase, he’s willing to “hold a gun to the head of the American people” in order to get it.

— *Michael Tanner is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of Leviathan on the Right: How Big-Government Conservatism Brought Down the Republican Revolution.*