



Presidential Budgets Are an Empty Political Ritual

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Every society has its rituals. Indeed, while the details vary from place to place and time to time, ritual itself is a human universal, according to anthropologist Donald Brown.

I'm a big believer in the importance of rituals. They provide an important conduit for the transmission of priorities, meaning and respect in any society. Where I think civilizations run into trouble is when they don't recognize a ritual for what it is.

The Roman Empire was full of rituals and rites. These customs helped the Romans organize into the most formidable social organization the world had ever seen, ruling a vast swath of the globe. But over time, the rituals of the empire drifted away from the demands of governing.

This is how empires fall: when the facts on the ground do not fit the rules and expectations of those who govern.

The 1987 film "The Last Emperor" chronicles the life of Puyi, the last emperor of China. It offers a poignant taste of the disconnect between the rituals of an antiquated ruling class and the society that has moved on. Puyi is holed up in the Forbidden City, surrounded by guards, court eunuchs and other servants who cater to his every whim, even as the revolutionary armies marched on the walls to take China in a different direction.

Of course, it's not just empires. This is how all regimes — monarchies and democracies included — ultimately perish. The rituals that once helped enforce order become distractions from the demands of reality.

This thought occurred to me recently while watching the spectacle of the latest White House budget proposal.

The unveiling of the presidential budget is an odd ritual in Washington. It is greeted as a document of great significance, even though its unveiling is almost never anything more than an act of pure symbolism. Activists with vested interests in the force and direction of the money spigot pretend not to know this and ritualistically gnash their teeth and rend the cloth of their figurative togas in outrage if the president does not offer more money than was offered the year before. (In Washington, trimming the rate of increase is considered a cut.)

My point is not to defend every spending priority of the Trump administration, nor to say that Trump's proposed budget is indefensible.

Rather, my point is that the game itself is disconnected from reality. It is the budgetary equivalent of a gladiatorial contest — a distracting spectacle that has little bearing on the fundamental problems we face. We argue about whether or not Cookie Monster should be fed to the lions. We beseech the crowd to answer whether NPR should get the thumbs up or the thumbs down.

These are all entertaining battles, but it's theater, little more than budgetary stagecraft.

To strain the metaphor a bit, the real threat to the Republic isn't inside the gladiatorial arenas of talk radio and cable television; it's the barbarian horde of debt and entitlement.

Non-defense discretionary spending amounts to roughly 16 percent of the budget. You could cut all of it to zero and you would only slightly delay the fiscal reckoning that would come from the metastasizing growth of the national debt and the entitlement spending that fuels it. In 2008, the federal debt was 39 percent of GDP. Last summer, it was 75 percent of GDP. According to the Congressional Budget Office, if we stay on our current course, it will be 86 percent by 2026. By 2046, it will hit 141 percent of GDP.

With regard to the president's rumored plan to cut \$10.5 trillion over the next 10 years, the Cato Institute's Mike Tanner writes: "Without making changes to our insolvent entitlement programs — Social Security and Medicare alone face some \$80 trillion in future red ink — there is simply no way to get anywhere near \$10.5 trillion in spending cuts."

But neither President Trump nor the Democratic leadership wants to cut entitlements. Trump's budget simply moves the money around, and he has yet to unveil the costs of his additional spending for his big infrastructure push.

The causes of Rome's fall are the subject of endless debate, but nearly all historians agree that one of the major factors was the endless accumulation of debt driven by entitlements — largely in the form of land and titles of nobility — to more and more segments of Roman society.

The Caesars and the senators simply found it too difficult a problem to fix, so they played their ritualistic games until reality had its say.