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Let's get serious about big-spending ways

By Tad DeHaven

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Runaway federal spending has emerged as the chief issue on the minds of voters heading into the fall election season -- and for good reason. In 2000, the federal government spent \$1.8 trillion while debt held by the public stood at \$3.4 trillion. A mere decade later, the federal government is on pace to spend \$3.7 trillion while publicly held debt is approaching \$10 trillion.

While European welfare states are beginning to collapse under their own weight, the Obama administration and Democrat-controlled Congress are pushing the U.S. toward a similar fate of unsustainable social welfare spending. Obama's latest budget would push publicly held debt as a percentage of gross domestic product to 90 percent by 2020 -- a height last seen at the end of World War II.

Today, entitlement spending is driving the debt explosion. Unfortunately, the president's expansion of the government's role in health care will exacerbate the problem. Meanwhile, House Democrats just pushed through another \$102 billion in spending for allegedly stimulative activities. The measures add "only" \$54 billion to the

deficit, thanks to \$48 billion in tax increases.

For their part, Republicans are getting pretty good at halfheartedly objecting to the Democrats' spending orgy. But at a time when citizens are warning both parties to stop their fiscally profligate ways, Republicans need to do more than just say no. They need to point out the underlying problems with federal spending; for example, that continuing to extend unemployment benefits helps keep unemployment high.

But Republicans, like Democrats, are afraid of offending potential voters by threatening to take away their subsidies.

Republican lack of credibility on cutting spending can be seen in the House Republican leadership's new www.youcut.org website, which each week lists five possible spending cuts for citizens to vote on. The "winning" cut proposal then goes to the House floor for a vote.

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The problem: The cuts the Republican leadership has selected thus far are minuscule. For instance, one item recently proposed for cutting was \$1 million in mohair subsidies. In the world of federal agriculture subsidies, this cut represents chump change. Republicans can't be considered serious about restraining the budget unless they put subsidies for wheat, corn, soybeans, rice and cotton on the chopping block.

While neither party's leadership offers taxpayers much hope of ending the spending madness, a handful of Republicans appear to understand that their party needs to take bolder steps. Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., has introduced a blueprint for reining in runaway federal entitlement programs. The SAFE Act, sponsored by Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas, would cap annual growth in the federal budget to inflation plus population growth. In the Senate, Tom Coburn, R-Okla., has repeatedly offered measures to eliminate unneeded federal programs.

The Republican leadership needs to embrace these efforts, which would signal to apprehensive voters that the party is ready to atone for its big-spending ways of the past decade.

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