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Biden's budget scalpel missing: Spend & tax plan breaks tradition of trying to cut waste

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President Obama famously labeled him Sheriff Joe, the man the government had to answer to when it came to wasting taxpayers' money. But somewhere along the way, President Biden put away his budget scalpel.

Mr. Biden submitted a spending blueprint to Congress late last month that hikes spending nearly across the board and forgoes any calls to Congress to eliminate wasteful programs.

In fact, it's the first budget in more than 15 years, dating back to the Bush era, not to provide a list to Congress of suggested cuts.

“The budget did reflect a big sort of philosophical shift even away from the Obama years,” said Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute. “Even during the Obama years, there was an effort to try to make it look like they were dealing with the deficit by having revenue raisers to have a downward trajectory for the deficit. That's kind of all gone out the window.”

Mr. Biden's wariness of cuts started even before the budget.

A little more than a week after he took office, Mr. Biden sent Congress a message saying he was canceling a list of 73 budget “rescissions” that President Trump had sent to Capitol Hill, totaling \$27.4 billion in spending. Congress wasn't particularly keen on the cuts anyway, but Mr. Biden's move was as an early signal that he came to build the budget, not to trim it.

The lack of cuts was particularly striking when compared to the last Democrat in the White House, Mr. Obama, who promised to wield “a scalpel” on the budget and invested serious

legislative muscle into getting Congress to trim bloated programs. Mr. Biden was his right-hand man.

Taxpayers for Common Sense, a watchdog, pointed out that Mr. Biden couldn't find any program to cut at the Agriculture Department — “not even the stuff Sec. [Tom] Vilsack and then-VP Biden thought was ripe for the picking back in the Obama Administration.”

That includes programs like rural grant funding and the McGovern-Dole Food for Education program, which sends U.S. agriculture products to poor children in other countries.

The Obama administration regularly called for trims to McGovern-Dole, arguing the money wasn't being used properly. The Trump administration called for full elimination of McGovern-Dole, saying it had only a limited benefit to American farmers and was plagued with oversight slip-ups.

Mr. Biden's budget doesn't take a swing at it.

All told, Mr. Obama's final proposed budget called for more than \$100 million in budget cuts to the Agriculture Department. Mr. Trump was more ambitious. His final budget, a year ago, called for cuts totaling about half a billion dollars from the department, whose discretionary budget at the time totaled \$35 billion.

Mr. Biden's budget has none, according to Taxpayers for Common Sense.

Overall, the new budget calls for spending about \$6 trillion in 2022, rising to \$8.2 trillion a decade from now. Federal debt held by the public would rise, slightly, from 110% of gross domestic product this year, to 114% in 2024, and 117% in 2031.

The White House budget office didn't respond to a request for comment for this story.

The Agriculture Department said this year's budget submission was meant to be a recovery after years of cuts that left agencies understaffed.

“This budget is about making investments in rural America to build back better in spaces like expanded broadband coverage and addressing climate change so that farmers are not constantly playing catch-up from drought or extreme weather,” a department official said.

Marc Goldwein, senior vice president at the Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, said Mr. Biden's budget overall is heavily focused on his infrastructure and social welfare priorities, which may be one reason why there are no cuts.

He said that doesn't mean they won't propose cuts in future years.

“I cut the administration a break for their first year. If it's year two and their budget is again missing this stuff I think there's less of an excuse for that,” he said.

CRFB calculates that Mr. Biden's blueprint, while overall boosting spending, taxes and near-term deficits, contains some \$214 billion in trims to projected spending.

Most of the trims come from a vow to limit future growth in Pentagon funding, and the rest comes from what's known in Washington as “program integrity” — essentially a call to weed out bogus payments in major government funding like Medicare or unemployment.

Presidents in their first year traditionally submit barebones outlines a few weeks into their tenure, then deliver a longer blueprint to Congress in April or May.

Mr. Obama, in 2009, managed to produce a 131-page volume for Congress with detailed cutting instructions. Mr. Trump, in 2017, had a 171-page volume ready for Capitol Hill. Mr. Obama had better luck with his cuts than Mr. Trump.

Mr. Edwards, who serves as editor of DownsizingGovernment.org, said there's an argument to be made that the Biden budget, lacking any a list of cuts, is more honest than past presidents' submissions, which counted the cuts as deficit savings, even though Congress often ignored most of the suggestions.

But Mr. Edwards said he still liked the idea of presidents submitting the list. Even if they didn't get approved by Congress, they can spark conversations about the trajectory of spending. And besides, he said, Mr. Biden's budget uses its own gimmicks such as front-loading spending increases while proposing to pay for them with longer-term taxes.

"Biden's budget has its own fakery," Mr. Edwards said.

He said the lack of worry over spending and deficits crosses party lines and has only intensified amid the pandemic. Both Republicans and Democrats, he said, seem to have concluded that trillion-dollar annual deficits won't harm the U.S. economy.