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Gene Healy: Tea Partiers should get serious

By: [Gene Healy](#)
Examiner Columnist
February 16, 2010

Anyone who's been to a Tea Party rally knows this is no Astroturf movement. These are ordinary citizens, rightly furious that the federal government has sold the country a junk mortgage on its future, sticking America with an unsustainable debt.

Yet there are those who doubt the new activists' sincerity, asking, in effect, "Where were you when George W. Bush was spending faster than Lyndon Johnson?" It's a fair question.

The Tea Partiers insist they're nonpartisan, devoted only to staving off our looming fiscal apocalypse by any means necessary. If so, they can prove their authenticity by backing substantial cuts in entitlements and defense.

Tea Party pressure has already forced President Obama to call for a three-year freeze of nonsecurity spending. But that's just 16 percent of the federal budget. You could zero that out entirely next year and still end up hundreds of billions in the hole.

Rail against earmarks, foreign aid and "welfare queens" to your heart's content. But all that comes to a rounding error in a \$3.7 trillion federal budget, over 75 percent of which consists of defense and entitlements.

To his credit, Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., ranking member on the House Budget Committee, has proposed a "Roadmap for America's Future" that makes serious cuts: \$650 billion over the next decade -- for starters. After raising the retirement age, voucherizing Medicare and reforming the tax system, Ryan's plan would eliminate the long-term deficit, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Former Reagan official Bruce Bartlett argues that endorsing Ryan's road map is the "minimum requirement" for anyone serious about cutting spending. But for the middle-class, middle-aged folks leading the Tea Party brigades, some of those cuts could bite pretty hard.

That's why Bartlett doubts many of them have the fortitude to embrace what's necessary to solve the budget crisis without raising taxes. Here's their chance to prove him wrong.

The Tea Partiers -- often thought to be hawks -- might further demonstrate their credibility by calling for cuts in the Pentagon's \$663 billion bottom line. As my colleague Ben Friedman likes to point out, we don't really have a "defense" budget: "The adjective is wrong."

We're spending ourselves into bankruptcy to maintain America's Globocop role, to gird for possible war with China (an absurd proposition) and to pursue the profoundly unconservative project of trying to socially engineer failed societies like Afghanistan into modernity.

The threats we face don't require taxpayer enrichment of Northrop-Grumman and General Dynamics. New destroyers and submarines are neat, but when it comes to battling the likes of the underpants bomber, they're about as useful as a wet flounder, and far more expensive.

Ryan aside, it's pretty clear that the GOP isn't serious about reducing spending. House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, distanced the party from the road map almost as soon as it was released, leaving reporters with the distinct impression that Ryan had soiled the punchbowl.

In the middle of the recent fight against socialized medicine, Republicans fought hard to protect the chunk of our health care system that's already socialized. If there's money to be saved trimming waste from Medicare, "we should spend it on Grandma!" insisted Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn. GOP leader Michael Steele proposed a "contract with seniors" insulating Medicare from cuts.


But that's no surprise. Politicians live to get re-elected, and they won't change their behavior unless and until voters force them to. What this country desperately needs is a political movement that will pressure them to change their ways.

The Tea Partiers could become that movement -- if they're serious.

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