

NATIONAL REVIEW

Budget Cuts and Ebola

What have the CDC and NIH actually been spending their money on?

By Michael Tanner
October 15, 2014

Stop me if you've heard this one before: Government fails at one of its most basic tasks. In response, the politicians from both parties complain that we are not spending enough money. And Democrats, in particular, claim that the failure never would have happened if only the evil Republicans had not cut some agency's budget. Sound familiar?

This hoary Washington drama is now playing out in regards to Ebola. With one death and one active case in Dallas, and several more Americans under observation, it is becoming clear that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) were not prepared for the possibility of this event. Protocols were not in place, training was incomplete, and so forth.

In response, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC) began running ads saying "Republicans voted to cut the CDC's budget to fight Ebola." Meanwhile the Agenda Project Action Fund, a liberal PAC, is running an ad targeting Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, and several GOP Senate candidates; the ad links the GOP to Ebola, and claims: "Republican Cuts Kill." In Arkansas, embattled Senator Mark Pryor (D.) waded into the issue directly, accusing his opponent, Representative Tom Cotton (R.), of voting "to cut billions from our nation's medical disaster and emergency programs." Even Hillary Clinton weighed in, claiming the CDC is "working heroically, but they don't have the resources they used to have."

It is true that spending for the CDC has dipped ever so slightly since 2011, but the cuts followed years of massive increases. Overall, since 2000, CDC outlays have almost doubled, from \$3.5 billion to \$6.8 billion (in 2014 constant dollars). Moreover, in January, the Republican-controlled House actually passed legislation that increased CDC spending for 2014 by \$567 million — \$300 million more than was requested by President Obama.

It's not that the CDC hasn't had money, it's that the money has been spent on things that have little or nothing to do with the agency's mission of protecting Americans from health threats.

As the agency's mission statement says in part, "Whether diseases start at home or abroad, are chronic or acute, curable or preventable, human error or deliberate attack, CDC fights disease

and supports communities and citizens to do the same.” Seems straightforward enough. There is, after all, a reason for the *disease* in the CDC’s name.

Yet, while the agency still might not have been prepared for an Ebola outbreak, President Obama did restart its push for gun control. Over the last decade, in fact, the CDC has spent much of its time — and money — studying seat-belt use, infant car seats, and obesity. These may or may not be worthy topics, but this focus makes it somewhat harder for Democrats to turn around and blame budget cutting for a lack of attention to the things that the CDC is actually supposed to do — like protect us from contagious diseases.

To understand just how misplaced the agency’s priorities have been, one need look no further than the CDC’s Prevention and Public Health Fund, which was included in Obamacare. The fund has received some \$3 billion over the past five years from a dedicated stream of mandatory funding, yet only a little more than 6 percent of that went toward epidemiology, lab capacity, or programs to fight infectious diseases. The rest has become a giant slush fund that has been used for everything from installing streetlights and improving sidewalks to promoting breastfeeding.

Republicans are also being blamed for the lack of an Ebola vaccine. National Institutes of Health director Francis Collins claimed last week that we would have developed an Ebola vaccine by now if it weren’t for NIH budget cuts. Democrats quickly picked up on the claim, with Democratic strategist Paul Begala even managing to work George W. Bush and the Iraq War into a claim that years of NIH cuts are responsible for the lack of a vaccine.

Actually, minor year-to-year fluctuations aside, the NIH’s budget has increased from \$29 billion in 2007 to \$30 billion this year. Of course it is possible that more money might have resulted in a vaccine, though there is no guarantee that additional funding would have been dedicated to Ebola, since, prior to this outbreak, the disease ranked lower than many others in terms of public concern. Nor does money mean a cure. We still don’t have an AIDS vaccine despite billions in research dollars.

On the other hand, the NIH has managed to find \$1.5 million to study why lesbians have a tendency to be overweight, while gay men do not. There was also nearly \$1 million for a study on the sex life of fruit flies, which revealed the shocking news that male fruit flies are sexually attracted to younger female fruit flies. Then there was \$688,000 spent to determine why people like *Seinfeld* reruns. It is even possible that the \$355,000 spent on studies of how fast husbands and wives calm down after a fight might have been better used for that elusive Ebola vaccine.

But why prioritize when you can demand more money?

There is a bigger issue here than simply the usual election-year demagoguery or the government’s insatiable desire for more money. It’s not even a question of waste and mismanagement, although there has clearly been plenty of both. Rather, we should understand that the further government gets away from its core functions, like protecting the health and safety of the American people, the less effectively it can carry out those core functions. A government that tries to do *everything* ends up doing nothing very well.

Liberals will no doubt continue to claim that the Ebola outbreak is an argument against limited government. Reality suggests it is exactly the opposite.

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