



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on January 26, 2011

More Sizzle Than Steak in State of Union Rebuttals

Rep. Michele Bachmann (R-Minn.), [delivering a response](#) for the Tea Party Express, was more like the cruise director on the ship of state, announcing there had been an explosion in the boiler room — an "unprecedented explosion of government spending and debt." The ship is sinking, but no cause for alarm. Moving briskly among her visual props, the director led us on a tour that took us from a 5.3 to a 9.4 percent unemployment rate, sailed past a 3.1 trillion addition to the national debt, and landed us somehow on the island of Iwo Jima, where U.S. Marines triumphantly planted our flag on Mount Surabachi near the end of World War II. That same fighting spirit, she suggested with a bright, confident smile, will enable us to conquer our mountain of debt.



Except this time, as the Pogo comic strip said years ago, the enemy is us. No foreign nation imposed that burden of debt on us. No single party engineered the "spending spree" that gets worse with succeeding administrations. "Our debt is the product of acts by many Presidents and many Congresses over many years," Ryan acknowledged, while noting that Obama in just two years has contributed more than his share. But the history of Republican governance over the past 60 years is not encouraging for those who want to shrink "big government," as Pat Buchanan noted in a recent column.

"After all," wrote Pat Buchanan, "FDR's New Deal was never repealed. It was confirmed by President Eisenhower. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society was never repealed. It was consolidated by Richard Nixon. Even Ronald Reagan conceded that he had failed to control federal spending, though he cut taxes and regulations." And the national debt doubled during the eight years of the George W. Bush administration with a Republican Congress for six of those years. Somehow, "big government" always manages to survive and prosper under the relentless attacks of Republican rhetoric.

The Republican majority in the House has voted to repeal the ObamaCare health insurance program, formally known as the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. The repeal will surely die in the Senate and would be vetoed by Obama if were passed. Where else will the Republicans cut without evoking a backlash from many of the same people who voted for them and contributed to their campaigns? Agriculture subsidies? The tax breaks for oil companies that Obama talked about? Food stamps? Social Security and Medicare? SBA loans?

There was no hint from the Budget Committee Chairman Tuesday night as to where the budget cutters might wield their axes. There were the usual paeans to "low taxes," "sound money," "the wisdom of the founders," "the spirit of the Declaration of Independence," "the words of the American Constitution." Ryan neglected only to mention the "Brotherhood of Man under the Fatherhood of God," otherwise known as BOMFOG.



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But he did stress "limited government." He said "limited government" six times in his speech of roughly 10 minutes. The question that is rarely asked is, limited to what? It was not that long ago that Republicans believed — or said they did — that the rightful role of the federal government did not include the education of schoolchildren, a task left through most of our history to local and state school boards. For 20 years, starting in 1980, Republicans pledged in their party platform to eliminate the federal Department of Education, created during the Carter administration. Yet Ryan, the devotee of "limited government," voted in 2001 for the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act, empowering the department to set standards, monitor test results, and impose a whole new set of regulations and administrative on local school districts. Both Ryan and Bachmann voted for a five-year reauthorization of the Head Start program in 2007, authorizing spending of \$7.35 billion on the program for Fiscal Year 2008 and, in the words of the bill itself, "such sums as may be necessary for fiscal years 2009 through 2012." The law also sets standards for teacher qualification and participant eligibility.

With perhaps a few exceptions, Republicans no longer speak of abolishing the Department of Education. And there would no small amount of hell raised if the new Republican majority in the House tried to cut off funding for Head Start. But how is a government that supervises the schooling and even the pre-school education of children in cities, towns, and hamlets all over America in any way "limited"? How is that local communities and school districts are not able to do these things for themselves? Does the government in Washington now have a monopoly on the "wisdom of the founders" that Ryan cited?

Neither Ryan nor Bachmann said a word about the \$700 billion defense budget or our trillion-dollar wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, neither of which have been formally declared by Congress, as the Constitution requires. Neither representative suggested reducing our far-flung military commitments and bases around the world. Apparently it is not yet time to stop defending Germany from a Soviet Union that no longer exists or to tell South Korea, which has twice the population and triple the GDP of their neighbors to the north, that it is time to begin providing for their own defense. "I believe America is the indispensable nation," said Bachmann, forgetting perhaps, that nations, like individuals, can succumb to the "pride that goes before the fall." If we continue to regard ourselves as "indispensable" to the defense of nations all over the globe, we may soon find ourselves unable to provide for our own.

Bachmann did call for a roll back of some of the regulatory edicts that have been or are soon to be issued from the executive branch, including the EPA plans to impose the "cap-and-trade" regulations for reduction of carbon emissions that Congress has thus far refused to enact. But she also fell back on that gimmick that has been prop for the GOP since the Reagan administration, the call for a Balanced Budget Amendment to the Constitution. The problem with our government's spending is not in the Constitution, it's in the Congress and the White House. If Congress and the President would obey the Constitution as it is, the budget would be balanced, since most of the spending that is done is in the exercise of powers nowhere granted to the federal government by that Constitution.

In politics, symbols and atmospherics often overshadow whatever substance may be found, as the effort is made to "sell the sizzle, not the steak." There was a good deal more sizzle than steak in both the Ryan and Bachman speeches.



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