



Will GOP Keep Spending on Steroids?

Among those who make up what the “inane-stream” media call the political right in America are those who fashion themselves “fiscally conservative, but socially liberal.” That means, I guess, that they believe it’s okay to spend more on such worthwhile projects as teaching little schoolchildren that males “marrying” other males or females wedding one another are forming bonds of marriage just as valid as heterosexual unions in what used to be called “holy matrimony.” And state or even federal spending on condoms for the kiddies in public schools is cool, too.



Or if the social liberal is truly a “fiscal conservative,” he or she may be in favor of keeping abortion “safe, legal, and (ahem) rare” (as long as it’s well done), but is opposed to any government funding of it. No moral scruples about the killing of helpless babies, mind you, but they’ll be damned (if they are inclined to use such immoderate, theological language) if they’re going to pay for it.

That may be but one, albeit an egregious one, example of straining at gnats while swallowing a camel. Even if former vice predator Al Gore had his way with the federal budget and all abortions were legalized, subsidized, and sanctified, resulting in fewer babies to pollute the air that Big Al somehow purifies with the exhaust from his SUV, federal spending on abortion would still be something less than a proverbial drop in the bottomless bucket of federal spending. By contrast, you could abort all the babies with nuclear bombs dropped on children’s hospitals and maternity wards all over America without making a significant increase in what we manage to call with a straight face “defense spending” in 21st century America.

And bizarre as it may seem, that kind of far-out military action would have about as much to do with defense of America as a great deal of the activity actually being conducted by the Department of Defense, known in more candid days as the Department of War. So the real threat to fiscal sanity in America is those seemingly schizoid “conservatives” who are for freezes and cuts in “discretionary spending,” but want only increases for the indiscreet spending that goes on by the billions per day under the not-very-benevolent guidance of the Pentagon. And those “conservatives,” sad to say, appear to be most of them. At least most of the so-called conservatives in Congress. As witness their use of the term “discretionary spending,” sometimes called “discretionary domestic spending” or “discretionary non-defense spending.” Call it what you will, it is the only area of our multi-trillion dollar federal budget where cuts are possible, according to Capitol Hill Republicans. Military spending permits no discretion.

The disconnect was apparent in the Republican presidential primary campaign of 2008, when lawyer-actor and former U.S. Senator from Tennessee Fred Thompson suddenly switched gears during a debate in Iowa and, in virtually the same breath, lamented the huge federal debt we are piling up for future generations and the unacceptable “squeezing” of the defense budget. Other hearts on the platform might not have bled so conspicuously for what Thompson saw as our poor, underfed,



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underfunded military forces, but with the exception of Ron Paul, none seemed even vaguely aware of the contradiction of calling simultaneously for frugality and increased military spending. You would almost think our trillion-dollar wars in distant Afghanistan and Iraq were being waged on the cheap by the Salvation Army.

The columns of Steve Chapman, who turned out to be an inadequate armchair warrior for Townhall.com, appear regularly on Reason.com, and the latest can be seen under the heading, "Will Republicans Get Serious on Spending?" The curious reader need not go far nor wait long for the answer. The subhead is, "Don't count on it." Chapman notes that when addressing The Federalist Society recently, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky told the receptive audience that "Americans want less government, less spending and less debt."

So far, so good. But here's what the leader of Senate Republicans proposes to do to rein in a budget that is a mere trillion or two out of balance: "We will vote to freeze and cut discretionary spending."

As Adlai Stevenson told the Russian ambassador at the United Nations, "Don't wait for the translation!" History has provided it and members of Congress know the language well. As always, "discretionary spending" does not include military spending. Anyone who doubts that need only ask any Republican he meets, either on Capitol Hill or on Main Street, if he or she is a "Reagan Republican." In most cases, the answer will be, "Yes" or "Absolutely!" or "Damn Right!" Possibly even, "Damn straight!" unless the lady or gentleman is too politically correct to risk offending the differently oriented Log Cabin Republicans. Or, as Bob Dole was inclined to say, "Whatever."

Ronald Reagan never wanted to cut defense spending. It hurts to say it, but "Poppy" Bush was right about his future running mate's economic plan: It was, and remains, "voodoo economics." If you have forgotten, it was to combine sharp defense spending increases, steep tax cuts and protection of the "social safety net" with a balanced budget, perhaps to be found between the forepaws of the rabbit pulled out of the great Gipper's top hat. Even as devout a Reaganite as William F. Buckley, Jr. called it an attempt to "square the circle." The same argument could be made against the healthcare plan the Democrats enacted this year: expand coverage to everyone, leaving no one out of the generous provision of "affordable health care," while at the same time reducing the cost. Old voodoo never dies, it just hopes and changes its partisan colors.

Perhaps Republicans might have been more persuasive in making that argument if the Grand Old Plunderers had not amassed such a miserable fiscal record over the past 30 years. Genuine reform in the next two years will be hard to come by. As Chapman wrote:

What is important is not so much what is said but what is omitted. The four biggest items in the federal budget are Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and defense. And those programs escape any mention from McConnell.

They make up about 60 percent of the federal budget. Domestic discretionary outlays, by contrast, account for only about 16 percent. If Republicans focus entirely on those, they will be sending a clear and quite believable message: We're not serious.

Indeed, when were Republicans in Washington serious about containing, much less reducing, spending? What Barry Goldwater disparagingly called Eisenhower's "dime store New Deal" looks rather frugal and sensible compared to what we have seen since. Ronald Reagan, the product of image-conscious Hollywood, replaced a White House portrait of Harry Truman with one of Calvin Coolidge. Liberals were indignant, but they need not have worried. Reagan's spending spree left all previous presidents



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quite in the shade. The “dime store New Deal” was long gone. Reagan gave us the New Deal on speed. The Bush and Obama (call them “Bushama”) administrations have given us the Fast Deal on steroids. That is the fiscal stimulus chemical that needs to be the target of a new “war on drugs” when the next Congress convenes in January.

But as Chapman wisely advised, “Don’t count on it.”



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