



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on March 19, 2018

Published in the March 19, 2018 issue of [the New American](#) magazine. Vol. 34, No. 06

Trump's Towering Spending

To the usual media-modulated scorn, the Trump administration released its annual budget on February 12. It's not really a budget, of course — merely a budget proposal, most of the provisions of which will be set aside by Congress as it decides how to continue to rack up federal IOUs. The Constitution does not give the president a scintilla of authority over public funds, except insofar as he can choose to veto any bill passed by Congress, including appropriations bills. Thus the Trump “budget” ranks somewhere between a suggestion and a flight of fancy, in terms of the likelihood of any of it ever seeing the light of legislative day. But to the extent that it indicates the priorities of the Trump administration and may inform the budgetary priorities of the majority GOP, it is useful to consider.



President Trump rode to office on a wave of discontent with burgeoning public debt and out-of-control taxation, borrowing, and spending. Trump the businessman promised massive cutbacks to useless and inefficient government programs. But his budget proposal is something of a mixed bag in this regard, proffering deep cuts and outright cancellations of costly programs long abhorred by the Right, while inexplicably offering others continued sustenance.

Budget Priorities

To no one's surprise, the Trump budget proposal makes massive priorities out of defense and border security. Hundreds of millions more are to be spent on missile defense, with 20 new missile interceptors to be deployed in Alaska, presumably to defend against the growing threat of North Korean ICBMs. In addition, the ship-based Aegis missile defense system and the vaunted Patriot anti-missile missiles would be beefed up. On the contentious border-wall proposal, the Trump budget contemplates spending \$18 billion to construct the next segment of the border wall, mostly in the heavily trafficked lower Rio Grande Valley, extending the Mexico-U.S. border wall from its current level of about one-third of the entire border to roughly one-half. Additionally, the Trump budget proposes setting aside \$782 million to hire 2,000 more U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers, as well as 750 additional Border Patrol agents. Americans justifiably concerned with border security and with the readiness of our military to confront any threat to our homeland will surely be cheered by these proposals.

The Trump budget also envisions ending government funding for the massively expensive International Space Station by 2025, much to the chagrin of NASA and space buffs everywhere. However, Trump wants to set aside \$150 million to encourage commercial development of the space station, suggesting



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that the Trump administration is less interested in terminating the costly, decades-old project than allowing it to be transformed into a private venture — perhaps a space hotel for long-anticipated space tourists. There will likely be no shortage of private concerns interested in taking over the orbital facility — or at least, the U.S.-owned modules thereof. After all, private firms such as SpaceX, with its increasingly sophisticated, partially reusable rockets, and Bigelow Aerospace, with its expandable orbital modules, one of which is now attached to the International Space Station, are demonstrating remarkable creativity in developing new technology to reach and colonize space, at a fraction of the cost that government has ever been able to deliver such services. We suppose that a privately owned and run International Space Station and other private space stations would operate far less expensively and would soon be accessible to more than a handful of elite, government-trained astronauts and cosmonauts. Privatization, as the Elon Musks are now showing the world, may yet democratize access to the final frontier.

In an entirely different budgetary realm, Trump's budget contemplates eliminating — to the delight of conservatives — the odious National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The NEA in particular is a longtime bugbear of the Right for its support of culturally and morally subversive art and research. Those with long memories will recall the '80s-era controversy over the homoerotic photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and the blasphemous so-called art of Andres Serrano (whose most celebrated work depicted a crucifix immersed in the artist's own urine); both of these artists were subsidized by the American taxpayer, courtesy of the NEA. That the Trump administration would propose to eliminate completely this odious enemy of decency is a long-overdue step in the right direction.

Another welcome target of the Trump budget proposal is climate-change research, a vehicle for radical leftist leverage over public policy for nearly three decades. Lavish public spending on research into the “settled science” of anthropogenic climate change has led to a welter of anti-free market policies across the Western world, and has become the entering wedge for the radical environmentalist political agenda. Now the Trump budget proposes to cut spending for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) by one-third, a figure that would include the elimination of EPA-sponsored climate-change research. Moreover, the Trump budget would cut EPA staffing by 20 percent — this, on top of the large numbers of EPA staffers who quit the agency when Trump was elected, and have not been replaced.

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This article appears in the March 19, 2018, issue of The New American.

The Trump budget proposal requests massive cuts in federal housing and rental subsidies — an area in which Trump the developer probably has particular expertise. Trump wants to reduce the budget for rental assistance programs by 11 percent, and to eliminate altogether Community Development Block Grants, as well as the Public Housing Capital Fund, which is used to fund public housing projects nationwide. And the proposal even requests legislation that would require able-bodied recipients of housing assistance to work. All of this, of course, is anathema to those who want as many Americans as possible to be dependent on government. The National Low Income Housing Coalition's Diane Yentel, in calling on Congress to reject Trump's budget, called the proposals “cruel and unconscionable,” with dire consequences for seniors and those with disabilities, who could find themselves summarily evicted. Overlooked in the hyperbolic rhetoric of the Left is the inconvenient truth that, in the recent two-year spending agreement passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump, \$2 billion were



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specifically earmarked for HUD, with \$1 billion of that amount to “avoid rent increases on elderly and disabled families receiving rental increases.”

In a similar vein, the Trump budget proposal would cut the “food stamp” program (officially, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP) by \$213 billion, or almost 30 percent, over the next 10 years. As with housing assistance, the Trump proposal also wants legislation requiring able-bodied food stamp recipients to work. And as with housing assistance, the proposed cuts in the food stamp program are being met with howls of outrage from the Left. Stacy Dean of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities said that Trump’s proposal “would be devastating for the one-in-eight Americans who use SNAP to put food on the table every day.” The fact that one in eight Americans is now dependent on the federal government for food is an outrage that apparently does not faze the Left at all.

Major Letdowns

For Trump boosters expecting a wind-down of unconstitutional involvement in public education, don’t hold your breath. Republicans for decades have been breaking promises to end the Department of Education, and the Trump administration does not look to change this trend. Instead of defunding the department, the Trump budget plan merely looks to reorder its priorities. A proposed new Opportunity Grants program would offer funding for low-income students to attend private schools, and would significantly expand charter-school funding. Additional large sums are targeted at STEM education and opioid abuse prevention programs. Overall, the education budget would decrease by more than 10 percent from last year, but the federal government’s involvement with education would continue unabated. Indeed, it could be argued that, with new funding targeting private schools, the scope of government involvement will be expanded, even as overall costs go down.

An even bigger disappointment is healthcare. Whereas Candidate Trump promised to repeal ObamaCare (and also, unfortunately, to replace it with another unspecified federal healthcare program), the latest Trump budget proposal is long on vague expectations but short on specifics. According to the relevant documents, repeal of the grotesquely misnamed Affordable Care Act should take place “as soon as possible,” and block grants should be given to the states to enable them to set up programs for the uninsured.

But oddly, the budget proposal also calls for \$11.5 billion in bailouts for insurance companies participating in the Affordable Care Act’s disastrous healthcare exchanges. Those exchanges have — as predicted by ObamaCare’s opponents — been losing gargantuan sums of money, prompting insurers either to withdraw from the exchanges or to massively hike rates year after year. The contemplated bailouts will add another layer of dependency on taxpayer funds, even as they prolong this disastrous program and give its supporters a new lease on life. These bailouts are passing strange for an administration avowedly determined to rid America of ObamaCare root and branch, if not via congressional repeal, then by fiscal starvation.

Overall, the \$4.4 trillion budget proposal, including \$1.5 trillion in infrastructure spending, does eliminate or severely cut back a number of federal programs of dubious constitutionality that have long outlasted their shelf life. But it also represents, in many respects, a continuation of the fiscal status quo of massive deficit spending that has nearly driven the federal government into receivership.

Additionally, there is the matter of constitutionality, a mere bagatelle from the point of view of Washington insiders, but the real crux of the crisis of legitimacy that has engulfed our government.



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Nearly all federal government programs — certainly including all federal involvement in healthcare, education, and housing — are blatantly unconstitutional and need to be eliminated. While we recognize the political and humanitarian realities of needing to wind down rather than abruptly terminate government welfare and subsidies that millions of Americans have grown to depend on, it is also the case that, if such programs are not ended eventually, sooner or later they will be terminated brutally and abruptly by the pitiless laws of economics. And that is not a scenario that any of us wishes to experience — as any German who lived through the 1920s, or any modern-day Argentine, Zimbabwean, Greek, or Venezuelan, could readily attest.

In sum, President Trump appears to be taking the fiscal and constitutional crisis more seriously than any other president in modern times, but it is still a far cry from what will be needed for America to truly reverse course. In a day when principled constitutionalist leadership is needed in Washington as never before, we are still waiting for the president and Congress to do the right thing.

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