

Paul Bunyan Budget Choices

Americans love the Norman Rockwell image of hard work and perseverance as the way to solve any major problem, best epitomized by the well-used expression “little strokes fell big oaks.”

Quaint and still valid -- sometimes. But there are “little strokes” backed by hard work and then there are nano strokes that are the equivalent of budgetary air kisses. They barely crease the deficit tree. Those are what Congress believes will solve our ever worsening deficits woes.

For more than a year citizens have expressed their outrage at the inability of Congress to seriously tackle the deficit and budget issues – but to no avail. Voters want a budget ax, not small strokes. Yet Congress has ignored voter demands, ignored the tough suggestions of the president’s nonpartisan commission on deficit reductions, and ignored economic red flags to end our dangerous spending and find ways to reduce our engorging \$1.47 billion deficit.

Instead of Paul Bunyan cuts they diddle around the edges. The House has voted to slice \$90 million a year from National Public Radio and \$363 million per year from Planned Parenthood. They also look to zero out funds for the U.S. Institute for Peace, which now receives \$44 million a year and also cut out \$50 million from the Corporation of Public Broadcasting.

Putting aside ideological reasons, why bother with these cuts? These \$537 million nano-strokes will do nothing to fell that \$1.5 trillion deficit oak.

Said Rep. Marsha Blackburn, R-Tenn., said after that vote. "It is time for us to be good stewards and save the money of the American taxpayer."

Meanwhile, the good stewards ignore areas where cuts would actually make a difference, even as another \$223 billion was added to the deficit in the month of February alone.

What is the conservative duty in attacking the deficit? What is the progressive’s duty in attacking the deficit? There is common ground, if not common targets.

First, both parties need to stop deficit spending and find ways to reduce the deficit that casts shadows over all of our futures. Progressives can actually be the saviors here, by being counter-intuitive and creative. By taking the lead on entitlement reform, they can galvanize the debate and drive the decision making process. It could also reap them political benefits.

At this point the 2012 elections look to be about two issues: the economy and the debt. While the economy may be stronger, it certainly will be far from secure and robust and a bipartisan agreement on the structural deficit would take the Republicans’ biggest campaign issue off the table. Voters are extremely deficit sensitive and are likely to remain so. The party seen as most serious on that issue will have a distinct edge on election day.

With entitlements and interest on the debt set to consume 70% of the federal budget in 2030, it's crucial that progressives fight to leave room in the budget for critical public investments on infrastructure, innovation, education and many other issues. Voters' views on Social security and Medicare and other entitlements are more forceful and more nuanced than pundits and politicians give credit, so a sharp ax will be better than dull haphazard chipping.

Some on Capitol Hill may finally be hearing. Speaking on MSNBC's "Morning Joe" show Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he is more optimistic about striking a deal on both a spending bill to cover the rest of the year and a potential agreement on a longer-term budget pinned on entitlement reforms proposed by President Obama's deficit commission. Schumer said negotiators could look beyond the discretionary spending cuts proposed by Obama and embraced by Congress in the short-term measures by looking at bloated non-discretionary spending, like payments to drug companies under Medicaid, as well as defense spending.

That would be a good first swing of the ax and a move away from the former "pain and shared sacrifice" narrative toward a more realistic security and growth budget frame.

The reality is each American's share of the deficit was around \$10,000 last year and growing each week. To save our future, every day Americans of all ideologies will be called upon to accept tough measures. While much of the current deficits can be traced to the recession, far more troubling, however, are the projections of deficits remaining at nearly a trillion dollars, even after the economy has fully recovered — and after our military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have been scaled back. What we can't afford to do is continue adding a trillion dollars or so to it year after year forever. We must change course.

It will take broad public engagement and steady pressure to persuade our elected representatives to move forward in a more responsible fashion. It will also take bipartisan cooperation — unfortunately in very short supply these days — and perhaps visionary progressive leadership.

Sharpen the ax and call Paul Bunyan. The luxury days of little strokes are over.

