

# Opinion: Want to Balance the Budget? Get Out the Chainsaw

**Antony Davies**

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(Dec. 10) -- In late November, President Barack Obama proposed a two-year wage freeze for federal workers as part of an effort to cut spending and rein in deficits. A week later, he announced a tax deal with Republicans that would, among other things, extend unemployment benefits, adding \$56 billion in spending. And then in short order, the Senate announced that it would forgo planned payment cuts to Medicare doctors, adding more than \$19 billion in projected federal spending.

Anyone wonder why it's so hard to get federal spending under control?

The deficit commission appointed by Obama offered up a plan that would cut spending by \$1.6 trillion over the next decade, as part of a broader plan to get federal deficits under control.

But the deficit commission only proposed to bring the budget "close to balance" over many years. The problem is that, as we saw this week, government spending tends only to rise, making it far less likely that Congress will abide by any long-term spending restraint. And most people simply don't understand the magnitude of the spending cuts needed to balance the budget.

Plus, many Americans want to protect some of the most expensive parts of government from the budget ax. And no one seems to be in the mood to raise taxes. So here's a way to get a sense of just how much spending would need to be cut to balance the budget -- currently expected to be in the red to the tune of \$1.4 trillion next year.

Let's say that Americans concerned with protecting the poor and disadvantaged decide to keep social programs in their current forms.

To do this, and balance the budget next year, would mean shutting down each of the following departments and agencies.

- Defense
- Agriculture
- Transportation
- Treasury
- Education
- Homeland Security
- Energy
- State
- Office of Personnel Management
- NASA

Give or take a few billion dollars, the savings would be enough to balance the budget.

If you wanted to spread the pain around, that would mean cutting every agency budget by 45 percent. This, in turn, would mean, among other things:

- Closing 30,000 post offices
- Mothballing 50 military bases
- Closing 25 national parks
- Cutting retirees' Social Security benefits almost in half
- Laying off almost 1 million civilian federal workers
- Retiring over 600,000 military personnel.

Clearly all of these options involve tough choices. But, until our political leaders admit that our government is on the verge of bankruptcy, you'll not hear talk of cuts like these.

Unfortunately, by the time our leaders are forced to talk about serious cuts, our deficit problem will have ballooned to many times its current size and the above list will look like wishful thinking.

*Antony Davies is a scholar at the [Mercatus Center at George Mason University](#) and an associate professor of economics at Duquesne University.*