

Political Maneuvering Over the Budget

There has been much discussion about the big picture items in President Obama's proposed budget for fiscal 2014. If the devil is in the details, as politicians like to say, some parts of Obama's budget will mean hell for some needy citizens.

Before getting into the details, let's talk approach. As I have often said, I am not a fan of some of the tactical approaches Obama takes. I understand that his reasoned approach — as opposed to the meat cleaver style of House Republicans — is far better than the GOP alternative. Still, it makes no sense to offer a compromise position in advance of actual negotiations.

A report by the Center of Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a nonpartisan think tank that analyzes government policy and programs, notes, "It is unusual for a President to include these kinds of compromise policies in his budget. Typically, the President's budget would include policies that are more akin to an opening bid in a negotiation — that is, the President's budget generally reflects his preferred policies. This budget, in contrast, reflects the President's position at a stage of the negotiations after several rounds of offers had been made. This budget differs significantly from the approach taken in earlier Obama budgets."

Clearly, compromises will have to be made at some point — even compromises President Obama



THE CURRY REPORT

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will not want to make — but this is not the time to make them.

Robert Greenstein, president of CBPP, said: "Politically speaking, I had thought that the White House should not put these concessions in its budget, as distinguished from offering them in bipartisan negotiations if and when Republicans agreed to dedicate substantial savings from curbing tax credits, deductions, and other preferences (known as 'tax expenditures') to deficit reduction. The Administration took a different approach. Having done so, it is appropriately insisting that the part of its budget that contains the President's last offer to Boehner is an indivisible package — that policymakers cannot cherry pick the budget cuts on their own, as some Republicans are already suggesting, without taking the accompanying revenue increases."

Given President Obama's overtures, one would think reasonable people would meet him half way. But the operative word is "reasonable." Instead of also making concession, Republicans have become

even more recalcitrant.

"When it comes to deficit reduction, the playing field is not level," Greenstein stated. "The President is sticking with his final offer to Boehner despite the anger that it's creating in his party and his political base due to the chained CPI and other proposals.

"The Speaker and other Republican leaders, however, have buried their last offer to Obama in December and are ignoring the fact that it included \$400 billion in revenue increases beyond what policymakers enacted at the start

of revenues and lower entitlement spending, the budget also reduces funding for discretionary programs by \$200 billion below the already austere caps set in the 2011 Budget Control Act (BCA)," the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report states.

"The \$200 billion in proposed cuts are evenly split between defense and non-defense programs, consistent with the President's December offer to Speaker Boehner. Non-defense discretionary programs include a broad set of government functions, such

as education, public health, law enforcement, veterans' health care, housing supports for low-income families, and scientific and medical research."

est level on record as a share of the economy (these data go back to 1962). This area of the budget, which has been cut significantly in recent years and is not a driver of longer-term deficits, would be cut still more deeply under the President's budget."

In addition the CBPP said, "The budget would increase the income-related premiums paid by upper-income beneficiaries and gradually expand those premiums to cover a larger fraction of beneficiaries. It would also increase cost-sharing for new beneficiaries by raising the deductible for physician services, introducing co-payments for certain home health care services, and introducing a premium surcharge for those who purchase Medigap supplement plans that provide near-first-dollar coverage (which encourages greater utilization of health care services)."

There are plenty of good things in the president's proposed budget, including his plan to expand early education and infrastructure investments, but Obama needs to break his addictive habit of making major concessions to Republicans before sitting at the bargaining table with them.

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of the year. They now brand any new revenues as unacceptable. The contrast between the President's approach and that of Republican leaders is striking."

Beyond the political wrangling, there is plenty to be concerned about.

"The budget proposes to replace sequestration for all years — 2013 through 2021 — with other deficit-reduction measures. While most of the proposed deficit reduction is in the form of higher

as education, public health, law enforcement, veterans' health care, housing supports for low-income families, and scientific and medical research."

Calling the non-defense discretionary program funding "ill-advised," The center's report noted, "The BCA funding caps already significantly constrain this area of the budget. In fact, under the BCA caps, spending for non-defense discretionary programs is on track to reach, by 2016, its low-

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