

# A Surplus of Indifference on the National Debt



Earlier this week, after meeting and negotiating with congressional leaders from both parties, President Trump proudly announced bipartisan support for (and his endorsement of) a two-year budget deal that raises the debt limit.

The plan removes the automatic budget cuts from the 2011 sequester, and adds a whopping \$320 billion in federal spending. This assures trillion-dollar annual deficits moving forward (even if we continue to have strong economic growth), and a 4 percent increase in discretionary spending each year.

If the Tea Party movement were still a thing, this news would have assuredly sent thousands of old guys donning colonial outfits into immediate cardiac arrest. After all, we're talking about a much larger "stimulus" than even the one Barack Obama spearheaded in 2009 (\$787 billion **spread out over 10 years**).

If you'll recall, it was that very legislative act that

launched the Tea Party movement in the first place.

Times have certainly changed.

After nearly a decade of Republican voters excoriating and punishing Obama, the Democrats, and even prominent leaders of their own party for presiding over far too much federal spending, the base abruptly fell silent on the issue in 2016 (where it has remained ever since).

The timing was by no means random. 2016 was when an unconventional Republican presidential candidate – armed with celebrity charisma, snappy catchphrases, and schoolyard insults – managed to win the nomination on a big-government platform that included an unequivocal refusal to deal with federal entitlement programs (unarguably the largest drivers of our national debt).

With Donald Trump's takeover of the party came the shocking abandonment of the one position that seemed to unite *all* base Republicans and conservatives: fiscal discipline.

Prominent media-conservatives, who'd spent the previous few years branding John Boehner, Mitch McConnell, and Paul Ryan as "RINOs" for failing to achieve sweeping spending cuts in the face of Harry Reid's Senate majority and Obama's presidential veto, suddenly decided that fiscal solvency wasn't all that important after all. Well, not as important as demo viewership, listenership, and readership anyway.

And as the *Washington Examiner's* Philip Klein pointed out this week, even the small-government Republican hardliners in Congress, who were elected to teach the "Establishment GOP" a lesson in fiscal restraint, quickly turned to jello:

The Freedom Caucus, founded to supposedly represent the Tea Party values of limited government in Congress, has devolved into a PR shop for Trump. Mick Mulvaney, one of the founders of the group, has discounted the importance of deficits as

the president's budget man and chief of staff. And even Rush Limbaugh recently declared that, "Nobody is a fiscal conservative anymore. All this talk about concern for the deficit and the budget has been bogus for as long as it's been around."

Limbaugh's breathtaking hypocrisy aside, the debt issue should be of *dire* concern not just to people on the political right, but to every American who cares even a little about the quality of life of their children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and beyond.

For those of who understood its importance during the previous administration, but somehow no longer do, I would recommend reading Noah Rothman's sobering piece on the topic. It lays out the gory details: the debt reaching 100% of GDP; accelerated borrowing costs for homeowners, students, and entrepreneurs; investment capital drying up; a significant recession; the collapse of Medicare and Social Security; taxes through the roof; political dysfunction that makes our current landscape look like a well-oiled machine.

The burden we're placing on future generations is absolutely staggering. Rothman's piece also explains why voters – not primarily politicians – are ultimately responsible for the looming debt crisis.

In the first two years of Trump's presidency, Republicans (holding the White House and majorities in both branches of Congress) had their best opportunity in over a decade to finally address this crisis. They squandered it – free to do so because the base and the conservative media let them completely off the hook. And contrary to modern right-wing sensibilities, no amount of asking "Would you rather have Hillary?" and playing *whataboutism* rhetorical games with the Democrats is going to rectify the situation.

I get that it's fun to make jokes about how much of our money

Democrats want to burn through, but those one-liners fall a bit flat when our current Republican president is on track to preside over more debt-spending than Obama.

The slightly good news is that the debt-ceiling deal still requires congressional approval, and there will probably be some changes to it between then and now. But the fact that a \$320 billion increase is the bipartisan, president-approved “compromise,” along with the reality that both parties have effectively purged fiscal conservatism from their platforms, means that those changes will be cosmetic at best.

I hope, when the time comes, we’ll be prepared to explain to future generations why we let political cowardliness ruin their shot at economic prosperity and security. But more likely, we’ll just blame it on the other party.

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