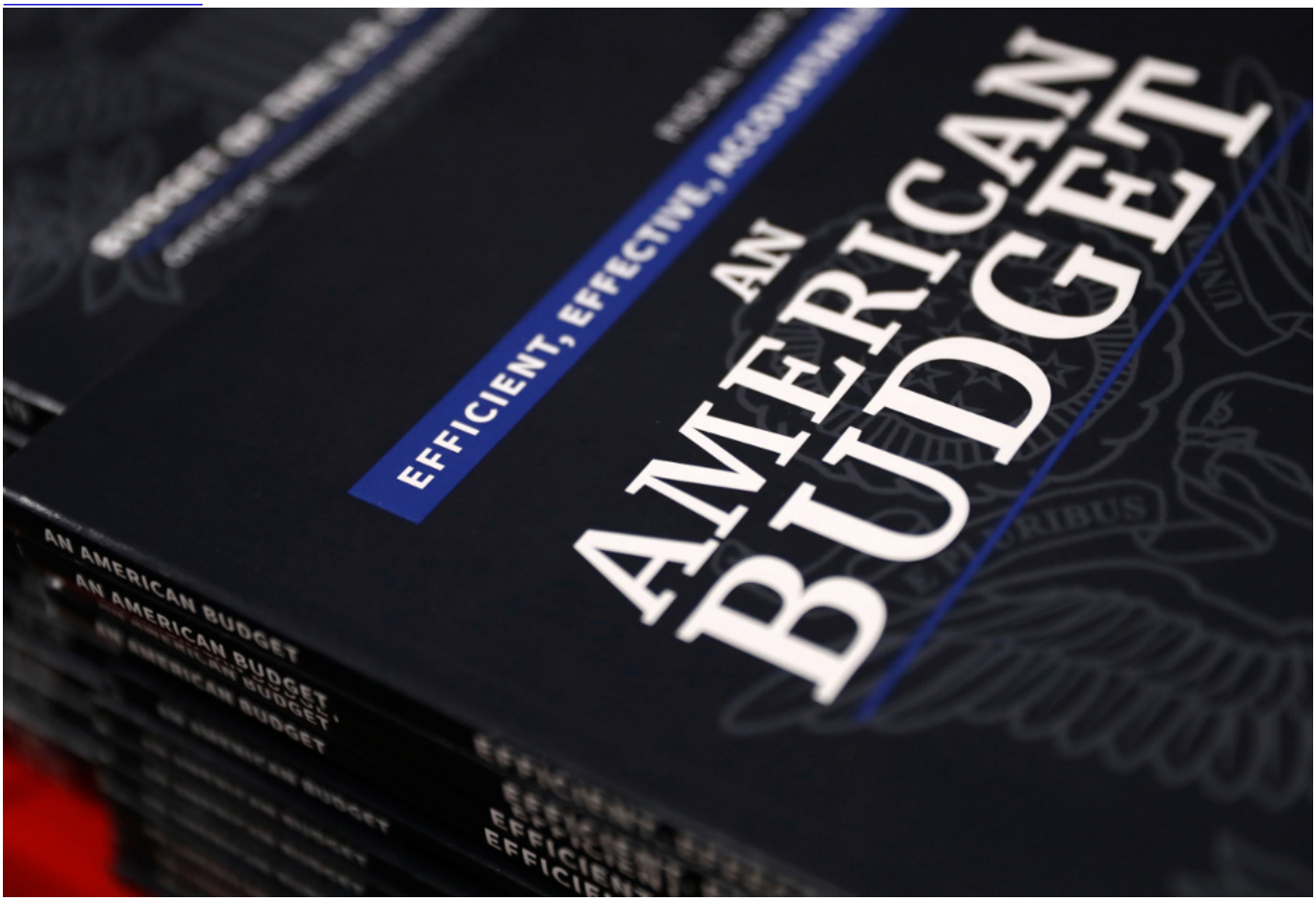
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New copies of President Donald Trump's budget for the U.S. government for fiscal year 2019 lay on a display table Feb. 12 at the U.S. Government Publishing Office in Washington. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)

by Robert Greenstein

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A president's budget reflects his vision for America. From that perspective, President Donald Trump's vision is stark, with the most affluent individuals and powerful corporations accumulating more wealth — and wielding more power, and facing fewer limits, to treat workers and consumers as they choose — while tens of millions of struggling Americans must reduce their already modest standards of living.

While some media coverage has portrayed this budget as largely irrelevant, such a judgment is premature and likely mistaken. The president is his party's leader, his party controls the House and Senate, and his budget reflects his priorities for the country. Congress likely won't enact many of the budget's specific proposals in 2018. But the budget shows what the president intends to seek if his party retains control of the House in November and picks up a seat or two in the Senate — the narrow margin by which legislation to repeal the Affordable Care Act fell short last year.

The budget comes just weeks after the president and Congress enacted a top-heavy tax cut, one that the Tax Policy Center estimated will give those who make more than $1 million a year an average annual tax cut of $70,000 — more than the entire annual income of the median-income household. Nevertheless, the budget calls for slashing one program after another that provides basic assistance for large numbers of Americans of modest means and promotes upward mobility.

It proposes once again to repeal the Affordable Care Act's coverage expansions and gouge Medicaid deeply on top of that — cutting Medicaid for seniors, people with disabilities, and families with children, as well as other adults — and to eliminate federal protections for people with pre-existing conditions. That would leave millions more low- and moderate-income people uninsured or underinsured.

It proposes deep cuts in basic nutrition, housing and income assistance for millions of Americans below or close to the poverty line, most of whom work for low wages, are elderly or disabled, or care for young children. For example, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program alone (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) — which research shows produces important long-term benefits for children — would be slashed a stunning $213 billion (or nearly 30 percent) over 10 years. Under the budget's proposals, at least 4 million low-income people would lose their SNAP benefits altogether. More homelessness and hunger would inevitably follow.

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It makes a mockery of administration rhetoric that urges the poor to work harder. For instance, its proposals would lead to the eviction of many people receiving rental assistance if they don't have jobs or aren't enrolled in work programs, even as it also proposes to raise rents sharply on many of them if they do work. Their rent would rise from 30 percent of their income — after accounting for child care and other costs — to 35 percent of their gross income with no accounting for the costs of child care that may be essential to give poor mothers an opportunity to work. And the budget's shrunken overall levels of funding for domestic appropriated programs, especially after 2019, would also lead to cuts over time in job training and college aid.

The budget also violates the spirit of the bipartisan agreement that congressional leaders negotiated in early February, by dropping most of the restored funding that the deal provides in 2019 for non-defense discretionary programs, while maintaining the deal's defense funding increases. Non-defense discretionary programs include education and training, scientific and medical research, transportation and infrastructure, low-income housing, environmental protection, the national parks, and the like.

Even with its "addendum" in the aftermath of the bipartisan budget agreement, the president's budget would set overall non-defense discretionary funding for 2019 some $57 billion below the levels the bipartisan agreement calls for.

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On top of that, it makes further changes (such as preventing certain savings in mandatory programs from helping to finance non-defense discretionary), so that in programmatic terms, overall non-defense discretionary funding in 2019 would actually be below the 2019 sequestration level, which Congress just agreed is too low to meet national needs.

This violation extends to specific programs as well. For example, the bipartisan agreement calls for adding $2.9 billion per year over the next two years to the discretionary Child Care and Development Block Grant, boosting this key federal program to help make child care affordable for low- and modest-income parents. But the Trump budget reneges on that and proposes essentially flat funding for the

program. The administration's blatant dismissal of a major bipartisan agreement on which the ink is barely dry may make bipartisan agreements harder to reach in the future.

And then, in years after 2019, the budget calls for cuts of unprecedented depth in non-defense discretionary programs, even though that's the part of the budget that contains many federal investments in long-term economic growth. By 2028, funding for non-defense discretionary programs would fall 42 percent below the 2017 level, after adjusting for inflation. Indeed, by 2028, total non-defense discretionary spending, measured as a share of gross domestic product, would be at its lowest level since Herbert Hoover was president.

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Like the president's first budget, this budget again uses unrealistic economic and revenue assumptions to artificially reduce projected deficits and debt. The president assumes much larger impacts on economic growth and federal revenue from his tax-cutting and other policies than nonpartisan experts find likely. We expect the Congressional Budget Office's assessment of the budget to again show its fiscal claims to be unreliable.

The budget further disappoints in its touted infrastructure package, which turns out to be something of a shell game — cutting key existing infrastructure programs to shift funds to a shiny, though poorly conceived, Trump infrastructure package that shirks federal responsibilities in this area by relying unrealistically on states, cities and private parties to come up with the vast bulk of needed funding.

The budget is a key way in which a president leads. And our nation faces serious fiscal challenges that demand serious leadership. But rather than a budget that reflects such leadership, this is a budget that rests on rosy economic and other assumptions and gimmicks, obscures the fiscal challenges we face, and proposes policies that maintain the huge new tax cuts that the wealthy and powerful received

from last year's tax bill while delivering one blow after another to those who are down on their luck.

This budget would widen inequality, worsen poverty and hardship, and further divide the country. With it, the president essentially calls on us to ignore what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" — and instead to enter a new Gilded Age.

[Robert Greenstein is founder and president of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.]

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