Opinion
Guest Voices



President Joe Biden meets with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of California to discuss the debt limit in the Oval Office of the White House, May 22 in Washington. (AP photo/Alex Brandon)



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As every family knows, paying bills and cutting spending is not fun. For the wealthy, it might mean fewer luxuries and a bit less conspicuous spending. For the middle class, it could require taking "staycations," buying cheaper brands and doing without the extras. For the poor, it can lead to choosing between buying food or buying medicine.

Budget cutting is hard for families even when they love one another, when each member of the family is willing to sacrifice for the others. Budget cutting is almost impossible for a government when legislators do not trust one another and even hate each other. The toxic politics of today make budget gridlock inevitable.

All politicians will agree on cutting "wasteful" spending, but they will disagree about what goes into that category. What is wasteful to one is essential for another’s constituents. This is the equivalent of a child saying the family can cut back on root beer, which his sister drinks, but not Coca-Cola, which he drinks.

In politics, Republicans are the children who want to cut other people's budgets, especially spending for the poor. Democrats are like the parents who don’t want to cut spending on any of their children. They want their employers to raise their salaries (taxes) to cover their expenses.

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Add to this the corrupting impact of campaign financing, which makes it more difficult for Congress to do the right thing.

It is no wonder the country periodically goes through budgetary crises, which is made more dangerous by the urgency to raise the debt ceiling. The debt ceiling is an artificial requirement conservatives are using to force a crisis to get their way with the budget. It is a foolish and dangerous gambit. Such antics scare the bond market and result in higher interest rates for government bonds.

Better, as I have argued elsewhere, to force members of Congress to stay in Washington if they do not enact the annual budget on time. Punish Congress for its failures, not the public.

The proposed budget passed by the House Republicans on April 26 cuts spending by $4.8 trillion, or by 9% over last year's levels. Future growth would be limited to 1% annually for 10 years.

The Republican budget targets Biden's program that would forgive up to $10,000 in student loans, as well as his increases to the IRS budget and the green incentives in his Inflation Reduction Act. The Republican plan would also tighten work requirements for Medicaid (which provides health care for the poor) and for those who receive food assistance under SNAP or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

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The Republican budget exempts Social Security and Medicare from cuts but is vague on where much of the cuts will take place. The Department of Transportation says it would require closing 375 air-traffic control towers. The Department of Agriculture says 1 million people would have trouble getting food aid.

There are no tax increases in the Republican budget.

The Republicans use an ax rather than a scalpel in attacking government spending. Everyone agrees we spend more on health care than any industrialized country but get less for our money. Rather than taking on pharmaceutical companies, the insurance industry and the medical establishment, Republicans pick on the poor.

This is counterproductive because, if the poor are sick, they cannot work.

Their attack on the Inflation Reduction Act, which was really a green energy bill, shows the Republicans are still in denial over global warming. They will sacrifice their grandchildren to keep the fossil fuel industry happy.

And cutting the IRS is as foolish as cutting a company's bill collectors. This will make the deficit worse.

Would that Congress could look seriously at government programs to make them better and more efficient rather than grandstanding for the media and their partisan base.

Nor can Congress ignore the need to look at the revenue side of the budget.

The United States has one of the lowest tax burdens of any developed country, with only 27% of GDP going to taxes, according to the OECD. While no one would want to go as high as France (46%), we could go to 30% and still be lower than every country in the EU except Ireland. Getting rid of tax loopholes for the rich and having a carbon tax would be sensible ways to increase taxes, but that would require political courage.

At the same time, Democrats must recognize the country cannot spend its way out of every problem.

The American people want our politicians to act like adults rather than children. The time for political theater is over. Raise the debt ceiling and then deal with the budget like responsible adults.