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## An exercise to help wrap the mind around the federal budget

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It is difficult for most of us to maintain a sense of all the elements of the federal budget. We spent about \$3.5 trillion in the last fiscal year. That's a difficult amount to get one's head around.

According to the Friends Committee on National Legislation, we spent \$1.2 trillion in the last 10 years in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Wikipedia, in 2011, we spent \$725 billion on Social Security and \$740 billion on the Defense Department. However, defense spending does not include another \$10 billion or so spent by the Department of Energy on maintaining our nuclear arsenal, \$48 billion for Homeland Security or \$141 billion in Veterans Affairs expenditures, chiefly the cost of caring for our wounded soldiers, bringing the total to \$949 billion. Interest on our debt totaled about a quarter of a trillion dollars. The dollars do add up.

Slate conducted a poll on measures to reduce the deficit and pay down the debt. It is a useful exercise to help us think through these issues. However, I could not successfully reduce the budget within Slate's limits. I would have doubled the defense cuts instead of accepting some of Slate's options. Actually, my preferred cuts would be a lot deeper than that. That's why the Slate poll is useful. It helps us grasp what we are all hearing and trying to talk about.

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