

Balanced Budget Amendment guarantees more needy people

Mark Pelavin Jonathan Backer | Jul. 7, 2011

COMMENTARY

American Jews recently heard the Torah story of the 12 scouts who entered the land of Canaan before the rest of the Israelites -- a cautionary tale about the importance of paying attention to detail.

Seeing enormous fruit, the scouts warned that the inhabitants of Canaan were so large and powerful that any effort to inhabit the land would surely fail. Joshua, however, thinks the large fruit signify bounty and recommends entering the land.

The moral of the story is that what may on its face seem dangerous may actually be benign. By the same token, what may appear harmless or desirable may actually be destructive.

The House Judiciary Committee recently passed a bill to create a Balanced Budget Amendment (BBA). On its face, the idea sounds worthy and benign enough. In its most basic form, the amendment simply forbids government from spending more than it collects in revenue.

We agree that our fiscal forecast is grave. If Washington does not restore fiscal order, within the decade, the federal government will devote \$1 trillion annually to paying off interest on its debt -- money that could otherwise be invested and contribute to economic growth.

The Union for Reform Judaism has long supported deficit reduction and the goal of a balanced budget, but with one key caveat: such efforts must never undermine addressing critical needs within our communities, or compromise the security or economic well-being of our nation.

The amendment currently under consideration is a dangerous means to achieve a worthy end, and would make it extraordinarily hard -- if not impossible -- for the federal government to meet the full range of its responsibilities.

The Constitution is designed only to be a blueprint for governance. As a result, a Balanced Budget Amendment lacks the specificity necessary to ensure that the disadvantaged do not unduly shoulder the burden of deficit reduction efforts.

Statutes, on the other hand, provide an opportunity to safeguard the most vulnerable populations. For example, deficit reduction packages in the 1980s and 1990s mandated automatic spending cuts if the deficit exceeded specific targets, but they exempted means-tested entitlement programs, on which low-income families rely. The amendment recently passed by the House committee offers no such safeguards.

What's more, the deficit reduction packages of the 1990s repeatedly paired fiscal belt-tightening with efforts to reduce poverty. The Children's Health Insurance Program, for example, was created as part of deficit reduction efforts of the 1990s because lawmakers recognized that deficit reduction carries with it the risk of increased

poverty.

The Balanced Budget Amendment is really a misnomer; its goal is smaller government, not a balanced budget. The federal government currently collects less revenue than at any time since the Truman administration, when one controls for the size of the economy. By imposing "supermajority" requirements for any bill that would increase revenue, this amendment would effectively tie one hand behind the government's back. If we can't bring in more revenue, the only option would be to cut spending.

It's worth remembering that the only time in recent history that the federal government generated a budget surplus was between 1997 and 2001, and it did so by raising far more revenue than it currently does. Serious deficit reduction must include at least the option of revenue increases.

The proposed Balanced Budget Amendment would erect barriers that would lead the federal government to spend less money than at any time since 1956, before Medicaid or Medicare even existed. This fiscal straitjacket could be tailored for no other purpose than to turn back the clock to a time where the government neglected the health care needs of its most vulnerable citizens, be they disabled, elderly or poor.

Much of the Reform movement's budget policy cites biblical authority from the commandment: "If there is a needy person among you ... do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your kin." While this passage obviously refers to individuals, not to government, nonetheless Jews are commanded to engage in the task of repairing the entire world.

Obviously our religious texts offer no guidance as to levels of spending or revenue. Instead, we must derive universal values from our texts and apply them to the modern political landscape. We know with certainty that a Balanced Budget Amendment would virtually guarantee more, not fewer, needy people.

And that is why a Balanced Budget Amendment would be both destructive and incongruous with Jewish values.

[This guest commentary was written for Religion News Service. Mark Pelavin is the associate director, and Jonathan Backer is legislative assistant, of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism in Washington, D.C.]

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