

Putting the national debt in perspective

By Thomas Schatz
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In January 1984, when the Grace Commission issued its report, its estimate that the national debt would exceed \$13,000,000,000,000 in 2000 unless action was taken to reduce wasteful spending was loudly and roundly dismissed as being outrageously pessimistic and extremely unlikely. The projection was not inaccurate; it was just premature.

On September 4, 2012, as Democrats began their convention to celebrate the re-nomination of President Obama and tout his achievements as one of the reasons to elect him for four more years, there were no speeches commemorating the fact that earlier that day, the Treasury announced that the national debt had exceeded \$16,000,000,000,000. The subsequent speakers also assiduously avoided any discussion of this “achievement.” Clearly, the convention took place in an alternate universe where the debt is simply unworthy of discussion; an insignificant sideshow rather than a massive obligation.

Really?

The following provides some perspective on the significance of the gross national debt exceeding \$16,000,000,000,000:

It is such a large number that it takes a fair amount of brainpower just to write out (and double check) the correct number of zeroes.

The national debt has increased from \$10.6 trillion to \$16 trillion, or 50 percent, since President Obama took office.

The national debt will increase from \$16 trillion to \$25.4 trillion in 2022, or 59 percent, under President Obama’s budget plans.

Every man, woman, and child in the United States owes more than \$50,000 as his or her share of the national debt.

Every taxpayer owes more than \$140,000 as his or her share of the national debt.

There are zero nations in the Eurozone that have a per person debt greater than that of the United States.

The national debt is greater than the annual output of the entire U.S. economy.

In the last four years, the national debt has increased by more than it did in the previous 17 years.

The facts speak for themselves, and paint a grim picture of the state of the nation's finances. While the \$16 trillion figure for the reported gross national debt is difficult enough to comprehend, estimates of the true national debt, including all unfunded liabilities for programs such as Social Security and Medicare, run from \$150 trillion to \$210 trillion.

Really?

Every day that goes by without action being taken by elected officials to reduce the debt makes prophecies of impending doom for the United States look more reasonable. Of course, if the U.S. implodes, the rest of the world will follow. Washington, for the most part, continues to pretend that all is well.

For example, the Senate has not passed a budget since April 2009, or more than 1,200 days ago. In fact, earlier this year, after Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) said he was ready to produce a budget resolution, Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said, "We don't need no stinkin' budget." With apologies to "Blazing Saddles," that is not exactly what he said, but it is what he meant.

On the other side of the Capitol, the House has passed a budget resolution for fiscal year 2013, along with dozens of bills to help create jobs and get the economy moving forward.

There are a plethora of other plans to cut wasteful spending and the deficit, starting with Citizens Against Government Waste's Prime Cuts, which would reduce spending by \$1.2 trillion over five years. The Government Accountability Office has issued two reports identifying \$400 billion in annual duplication and overlap, according to estimates by Sens. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) and Jeff Sessions (R-Ala.). And the Congressional Budget Office issues its own report on spending options every year, identifying hundreds of billions in savings.

There is no shortage of ideas, just a continuing lack of bipartisan will to agree to solutions. That is one of many reasons why polls show Congress at record-low approval levels. It is also why many pundits are calling the November elections the most important of our lifetime.

Really.

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