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March 17, 2005

REVIEW & OUTLOOK**A Budget, Not a Mirage***March 17, 2005; Page A16*

Mark it down as a minor miracle: Congress has finally agreed to a little enforcement discipline against runaway spending, thanks to a band of Republican House Members who stared down their leadership.

That was the good news this week, as 25 or so hearty conservatives, most of them backbenchers, demanded that Republicans mean what they say when they pass a budget. That is, they wanted some guarantee that the spending limits they approve at the beginning of the year -- which are announced with great fanfare -- will be enforced at the end when fewer Americans are watching.

That hasn't been the case for decades. The current Congressional budget process was designed by Democrats (and passed over a Watergate-weakened Richard Nixon's veto in 1974) expressly to disguise how much Congress spends. An annual budget resolution is passed each spring, but it lacks the force of law and the Members routinely exceed it when they pass individual spending bills.


Republicans deplored all of this when they were in the minority, and "budget process reform" was a rallying cry through the 1980s. But now that they're running the asylum, they don't want spending accountability either. Last year they exceeded their budget limit by \$500 million, and the leadership bitterly fought any reform.

Enter the Revolutionary 25. They united to oppose this week's budget resolution unless they were allowed to file a "point of order" on the House floor if individual spending bills exceed their budget resolution limits. Congress could still spend the money, but it would require a floor debate and majority support.

"The rank-and-file believe it is important that Members of the majority have the power to enforce the budget of the majority," says Indiana's Mike Pence, one of the ringleaders. "We want a budget, not a mirage." Because the budget resolution is usually a party-line vote that all Democrats will oppose, these 25 Members could have defeated the resolution this week if they hung together.

With all their claims to being tightwads, you'd think House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Majority Leader Tom DeLay would have welcomed this show of backbone. It certainly would help them in negotiations with the spendthrift Appropriations subcommittees. But the two leaders resisted until they realized that the Gang of 25 was serious.

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It is true that this year's draft budget resolution (for Fiscal Year 2006) is the best since 1997. It cuts non-defense discretionary spending by 0.8%, with an overall spending increase of just 2.1%. But that's just a promise -- or worse, a ruse -- if the limits aren't enforced. Mr. Bush's veto pen is one potential enforcer, but Presidents have their own priorities and sometimes they'll concede higher spending in order to get them. Congress needs a process to control its own spending habit as well.

All the more so if Republicans are being honest about finally wanting to pass a tough budget. "This is precisely the time to institutionalize the discipline that they have only begun to practice," says Mr. Pence. His allies include some of the brightest young Members, including Jeff Flake (Ariz.), Paul Ryan (Wis.), Gresham Barrett (S.C.) and Tom Feeney (Fla.). In the end, GOP leaders agreed to their demand for the point of order, and also to take up a budget reform this year that would have their support. The rebels will have to inspect the fine print, but at least some Republicans are again starting to behave like, well, Republicans.

Also making progress yesterday was the Senate, which beat back an attempt to remove oil drilling in Alaska from the budget. The GOP majority also defeated an attempt to impose a "pay-as-you-go" rule that would have made tax cuts nearly impossible to pass, and it beat an amendment by spender-in-chief Robert Byrd (D., W.Va.) to add \$1 billion in subsidies for Amtrak, the money-losing federal railroad. On second thought, and considering this is Washington, maybe that's all a major miracle.

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