

The 'CR' Is a Massive Spending Bill That Fails to Meet Conservative Priorities

Early Monday morning, congressional negotiators released text of a massive omnibus appropriations bill that would fund the government through Sept. 30.

The bill is expected to pass later this week with bipartisan support and avoid a government shutdown.

While the bill does make progress on issues like additional defense funding and increasing border security, it woefully fails the test of fiscal responsibility and does not advance important conservative policies.

The bill would provide base discretionary funding of \$ trillion for the remainder of fiscal year 2017, the level set by the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015. This is \$30 billion higher than the caps in the original Budget Control Act of 2011.

However, when you add in the additional spending for overseas contingency operations, disaster and emergency spending, and other funds not subject to the budget caps, that total rises by an additional \$93 billion.

First to the positives.

Defense and Border Security

The omnibus bill would provide an additional \$15 billion above the 2015 Bipartisan Budget Act level for defense spending and an additional \$1.5 billion for border security.

Unfortunately, the additional \$15 billion in defense spending is only half of what President Donald Trump requested earlier

this year and is inadequate to meet global threats facing the country.

The additional \$1.5 billion for border security is important in the battle to curb illegal immigration. However, none of these funds can be used for construction of a border wall, one of the president's top priorities.

Unfortunately, none of the increases in spending proposed by this bill would be offset. Earlier this year, the president released a "skinny budget," which proposed \$18 billion in 2017 cuts, yet none of those cuts made it into the latest budget deal.

The increases to defense and border security are designated as overseas contingency operations funds and are therefore not subject to spending controls.

While additional funding for the military and border security are a step in the right direction, these increases should be fully offset by reductions to domestic programs.

With the nation's debt at \$20 trillion and rising, Congress must show fiscal restraint and look to cut spending, rather than using budget gimmicks to continue to spend without restraint.

On top of the additional overseas contingency operations funds, the bill would provide \$8.1 billion in disaster and emergency funding in 2017—more spending that is not subject to the budget caps.

Among these additional funds are \$2 billion to states to aid recovery from flooding and severe weather and almost half a billion dollars for wildfire abatement in the western United States. Similar funds are provided each year, making it hard to distinguish these as truly "emergency."

Funding for these recurring expenses should be provided within

the base budget, and additional spending above the caps should be reserved for wide-scale natural disasters and unpredictable events.

Special Bailouts

By expanding an existing bailout of a private union, this bill proves that it's nearly impossible to shut the bailout door once it has been opened.

The bailout is for the United Mine Workers of America, which represents only about 10 percent of all coal production in the U.S. today.

In 1992, the Coal Industry Retiree Health Benefit Act opened the door to what was supposed to be a limited and non-taxpayer-financed bailout of health care benefits for one particular mineworkers' union.

But when the pool of non-taxpayer funds wasn't enough, Congress opened the spigot to federal taxpayer dollars (\$1.2 billion since 2008), and now it wants to further widen the bailout to cover workers whom the original bailout specifically said would not be covered.

It is absolutely true that coal miners perform hard labor in dangerous conditions, and neither coal miners nor any worker should have promises of health care and retirement benefits taken out from underneath them.

But the federal government is not the guarantor of private unions' and private companies' promises. If it were, every union and company would make unsustainable promises and simply expect the government to step in with future bailouts.

This health care bailout will maintain coal miners' Cadillac health care benefits at a taxpayer-financed cost of over \$100,000 per retiree over the next 10 years. (That's \$75,000 more than the coal miners would otherwise be able to access

through federal programs like Medicaid and Obamacare.)

And speaking of health care bailouts, this bill provides another one to Puerto Rico.

As the poster child for government mismanagement, political corruption and all the wrong economic policies, Puerto Rico faces an economic and fiscal crisis and now the federal government—and federal taxpayers—are set to pay the price.

The bill provides Puerto Rico with \$296 million in additional Medicaid funds to cover the first six months of 2018. But money is fungible, so what Puerto Rico doesn't spend on Medicaid, it can spend on anything else it wants.

And, as the United Mine Workers of American bailout demonstrates, there's no such thing as a temporary or limited bailout. This will likely just become a new baseline for further spending increases.

Furthermore, Puerto Rico and other U.S. territories already receive a disproportionate share of all federal welfare spending, despite the fact that their citizens do not pay federal taxes.

This bailout sends a dangerous message to state and local governments that if their budgets come up short, they too could receive backdoor Medicaid and other welfare bailouts that will free up resources to maintain otherwise unsustainable spending levels.

A Missed Opportunity

Overall, this bill fails to advance almost any key conservative policies and makes numerous concessions to the left. Among those, it would continue to provide funding for Planned Parenthood and do nothing to restrict funding to sanctuary cities.

Unfortunately, Congress has once again missed an opportunity

to get serious about cutting spending and make progress on conservative policies.

In March, The Heritage Foundation released a budget blueprint that outlined \$87 billion in cuts that could be made to discretionary programs almost immediately and laid out numerous policy options to limit the size and scope of the federal bureaucracy.

Ultimately, it is up to Congress to have the courage to make these things happen. {eo}

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