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Editorial

The not so super committee

The Budget Control Act of 2011, created as a final attempt at resolving the United States' debt ceiling crisis, calls for the creation of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, the 'supercommittee,' whose goal was to issue formal recommendations on how to reduce the U.S. deficit by at least \$1.5 trillion over the next 10 years. These steps would not eliminate the debt; rather, they would slow down its growth, as they would not decrease federal spending but reduce increases.

The recommendations from this bipartisan committee were to be presented to Congress by November 23. If agreement could not be reached in both chambers by December 23, the act calls for automatic across-the-board cuts, split 50-50 between defense and nondefense spending, including Medicare, an event referred to as sequestration.

To the surprise of absolutely no one, on November 23 the supercommittee, comprising six members of the House and six from the Senate, announced that the supercommittee had reached agreement on the fact that they could not reach agreement.

After the announcement a collective sigh of relief was heard from all potentially affected parties, followed immediately with panic-filled statements to the press that directed cuts would devastate the Defense Department, hobble NASA, cripple Medicare....

However, the automatic cuts mandated by sequestration would not go into effect until 2013, giving lawmakers ample opportunity to rewrite the original law, rendering the 2011 act toothless. This also brings us back to the game politicians on both sides have been playing for years now. The rules are simple: Acknowledge that we are in a serious debt crisis. Affix the blame somewhere. Call for cuts across the board except for—fill in the blank.

And now we get to raise the stakes in this game, because 2012 is a presidential election year. This should increase the decibel level on the discussion to ever higher levels.

But as all this goes on, we are back to business as usual. In December, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden told reporters that the agency's budgeting plans do not factor in the possibility of cuts demanded by sequestration. Leon Panetta, the secretary of defense, has stipulated that cutting his department's budget will make the nation less safe: "If Congress fails to act over the next year, the Department of Defense will face devastating, automatic, across-the-board cuts that will tear a seam in the nation's defense," he said. "The half-trillion in additional cuts demanded by sequester would lead to a hollow force incapable of sustaining the missions it is assigned."

But all of this political and fiscal posturing cannot drown out the fact that the nation is facing crippling debt. We can continue to kick this can down the road, or we can face the fact that everyone, every department, is going to have to take a hit. Otherwise, that silver bullet we all seem to be looking for may come barreling right at us.

Elaine Camhi
Editor-in-Chief