Votes that pushed us into the red

In the debate over the nation's rising debt, rhetoric trumps reality.

In January 2001, the U.S. budget was balanced for the first time in decades, and the Congressional Budget Office was forecasting surpluses totaling $5.6 trillion by 2011. A decade later, the national debt is larger, as a percentage of the economy, than at any time in U.S. history except for the period shortly after World War II.

So what happened? In classic Washington style, neither party wants to take responsibility.

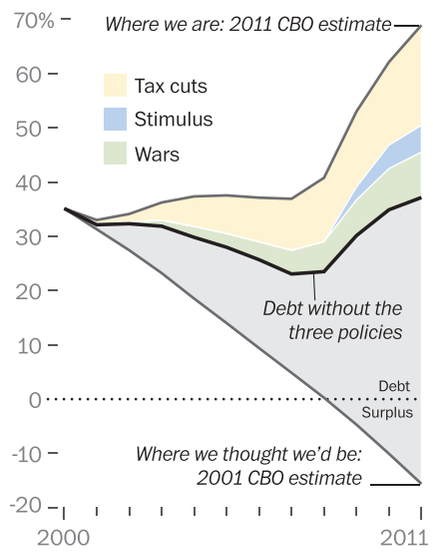
"Washington has a spending problem, not a revenue problem," House Speaker John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) said in April.

"Republicans made the contradictory promises that cutting taxes would lead to higher revenues and would force lower spending," House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) shot back in a speech in May. "They did neither."

The reality falls somewhere in between. In fact, 75 percent of current members of Congress voted for at least one — and in most cases more than one — of three policies that contributed to fully one-third of the $12.7 trillion swing from projected surpluses to real debt: President George W. Bush's 2001 and 2003 tax cuts, funding for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and President Obama's 2009 stimulus bill.

Here's a look at the overlapping priorities that led us to record deficits, and who voted for them.

The impact of three policies on the federal debt
Shown as a percent of GDP



By Karen Yourish, Laura Stanton and Hannah Fairfield

HOUSE

310 members who voted for these measures remain in the House

Michele Bachmann *(R-Minn.)*

Was not in office during tax-cut votes

"Our troops in combat deserve to be sent the resources and the reinforcements that they deserve to succeed in their mission in Iraq without strings and without delay."
April 25, 2007

Paul Ryan *(R-Wis.)*

"What we are simply saying is rather than take your money and find new ways to spend it for you here in Washington, we want to give it back to the American people."
May 16, 2001

Voted only for **war funding**
(Voted for at least two supplemental appropriations bills to fund the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq during Bush's last two years in office or Obama's first two years.)
Democrats James E. Clyburn (S.C.), Daniel Lipinski (Ill.) and Heath Shuler (N.C.)

Voted for **stimulus** and **wars**

Voted for **tax cuts** and **wars**
Collin Peterson (D-Minn.)

Voted for **all three policies**

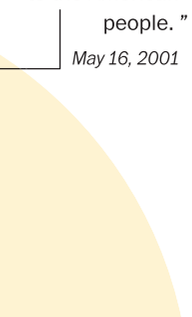
Voted only for **stimulus**
(Voted for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, also known as the stimulus bill.)

Voted only for **tax cuts**
(Voted for at least one of the two tax-cut measures enacted in 2001 and 2003, known as the Bush tax cuts.)

Voted for **tax cuts** and **stimulus**
None

Rick Larsen *(D-Wash.)*

"When the economy recovers, and it will, it will occur in spite of this massive pork-filled spending bill, not because of it. But the pejorative impact on future growth will be felt for years as the weight of the costs will curtail economic growth."
Feb. 22, 2009, after voting for the stimulus bill



Ron Paul *(R-Tex.)*

"My commitment to voters is simple: I follow the Constitution and I fight to make government smaller. This commitment compels me to vote for all tax cuts and against all spending increases."
March 30, 2001

SENATE

86 current senators voted for these measures

Bernard Sanders *(I-Vt.)*

"This jolt to the economy will help us recover from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression."
Feb. 13, 2009

Mitch McConnell *(R-Ky.)*

"This bill is about righting wrongs in the tax code that are so flagrant as to transcend partisan rancor . . . . I am proud to say that I believe that this surplus belongs to the American people."
May 26, 2001

Voted only for **war funding**

Voted for **stimulus** and **wars**

Voted for **tax cuts** and **wars**

Voted for **all three policies**
Republicans Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins, both of Maine

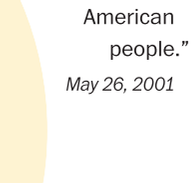
Voted only for **stimulus**
None

Voted for **tax cuts** and **stimulus**
None

Voted only for **tax cuts**

Dianne Feinstein *(D-Calif.)*

"It seemed an appropriate time to return some of that surplus to taxpayers, just as a business would do when that business was doing well." *May 14, 2003*



Jim DeMint *(R-S.C.)*

"Democrats will attempt to end the Bush tax cuts. Doing so violates the rights of individuals to keep their hard-earned money, and it hurts free enterprise." *March 1, 2007*

SOURCES: Pew Fiscal Analysis Initiative, Washington Post Congressional Votes Database CONTRIBUTOR: Serdar Tumgoren THE WASHINGTON POST

ESPN

George Grande, left, and Lee Leonard on the original "SportsCenter" set in 1979. ESPN's founders first envisioned a broadcast about Connecticut sports.

ESPN

Anchors Dan Patrick, left, and Keith Olbermann in an old promotional spot for "SportsCenter." Today, women are hosting the flagship show more often.

ESPN

Longtime analyst and anchor Chris Berman, left, at the 1986 NFL Draft with New York Jets player Freeman McNeil. ESPN has 70,000 hours of programming a year.

Armchair quarterbacking the armchair quarterbacks

ESPN FROM B1

football game." Really?

Even worse are the puerile comments about how "cool" or "awesome" it is to bask in the presence of a star athlete. Here's former coach and current ESPN analyst Jon Gruden on the joys of visiting Archie Manning, father of two NFL quarterbacks: "I got to . . . meet Archie and Olivia Manning in New Orleans, right there in their own house where Peyton and Eli Manning played catch in their backyard. That was pretty cool." What was Shales thinking? If someone wrote those lines in a TV script, he would skewer their inanity. Perhaps Shales hopes the reader will understand that Gruden sounds ridiculous. But he never says so, and that's the other problem.

This is essentially an oral history, with the authors contributing occasional commentary. So the book lacks a narrative voice to set the scene, describe the characters, pull the reader along. Authors are not just tape recorders with expense accounts. They need to analyze, criticize, validate their characters. Here, they're often missing in action.

Still, they tell a lot of good stories. I laughed out loud when a football player tried to evade a drug test by substituting a friend's urine. The friend was a woman, and the test came back saying he was pregnant.

More compelling is the tale of how ESPN got started. In the late '70s, a father and son team, Bill and Scott Rasmussen, wanted to broadcast news about Connecticut sports. They soon learned that by using a dandy new technology — satellites — they could reach the whole country at little added cost. Their second big insight was that they could charge cable companies a fee for carrying their channel. "What [ESPN] did was a little like the opening of the West in cable terms," the authors write, "because they enabled cable to become a big business."

Above all, they sensed the huge market for in-depth information about sports, far beyond the few moments on the 11 o'clock news. "We were showing three, four, five minutes of highlights!" recalled one producer. "The conceit was, don't just show me Emmitt Smith's touchdown, show me the key block that sprang Emmitt's run as well." And of course, most of the viewers who wanted to see that block were guys. "We sold male eyeballs to advertisers," says marketing director Judy Fearing. "Men are elusive. That's the value that we brought to the table." No wonder the network's first big advertiser was Budweiser.

If guys watched ESPN, they also ran it, and that caused big problems. The Rasmussens located the business in Bristol, a remote Connecticut town where their employees had little to do except work long hours, drink heavily, smoke dope and chase any woman who came within range. This environment was "a big frat party" and "a giant petri dish in which misconduct could breed and thrive." The most sensational charges (secondhand and unconfirmed) involve mailroom employees running a prostitution ring out of a company apartment. More serious and endemic was a culture in which powerful males used and abused females. Karie Ross, a courageous young reporter who publicly criticized her bosses (and then lost her job) says, "I don't think a lot of these men knew what they were doing was illegal, but they should have known that using the influence of their position to date or get sexual favors from these girls underneath them — who had no power whatsoever — was not right."

ESPN has tried to upgrade its policies on gender equality. Two baseball analysts were recently fired for mistreating subordinates, and last September "SportsCenter" was hosted entirely by women in consecutive time slots. The larger question is whether "the little corner store that has grown into an empire" can upgrade, or even maintain, its stature in a rapidly changing technical universe. Satellites long ago gave way to high-speed Internet connections. I'm an avid sports fan, but I haven't watched "SportsCenter" or "Baseball Tonight" in years; I just go to my computer and dial up the highlights I want to see, when I want to see them. In the future, how many babies will need "dah-dah-dah, dah-dah-dah" to go to sleep?

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