

Karen Telleen-Lawton: Here's Your Chance to Close the Federal Budget Deficit

AARP's online exercise gives power to the people

An advertisement for AARP Online. On the right side, there is a detailed illustration of Uncle Sam, an elderly man with white hair and a goatee, wearing a blue top hat with white stars and stripes, a blue jacket, and a red bow tie. He is holding a pair of silver scissors in his right hand, looking directly at the viewer with a serious expression. On the left side, there is a white rectangular area with a black border. Inside this area, the text reads: "How Would You Cut the Deficit?" in large, bold, black letters, with "You" in red. Below this, in smaller black text, it says: "Uncle Sam sure could use a hand. Tap into our deficit calculator and see how you would close the federal budget gap. Would you freeze pay for civilian employees? Raise Part B Medicare premiums? How about increase the gas tax? The choices are all yours. aarp.org/deficitcalculator". At the bottom left of this white area, the text "MARK FRIEDRICKSON" is written vertically. At the bottom center of the white area, the "AARP Online" logo is displayed, with "AARP" in red and "Online" in grey. The entire advertisement is set against a white background with a subtle, torn-paper effect at the bottom edge.

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | Published on 10.03.2011 2:46 p.m.



Want an antidote to the Bad News Budget squabbles we've heard endlessly from [Congress](#)? The [AARP's](#) online "[Can You Close the Budget Deficit?](#)" exercise is a terrifically satisfying experience. [Click here](#) to check it out.

The budget scenario presented presumes a shortfall through 2015 of \$607 billion. As the eraser-czar, you eliminate any of dozens of budget items categorized under Government Operations, Energy, Education, Military and Defense, Transportation, Health Care, Foreign Aid, [Social Security](#) and Taxes. You get to ax your least favorite line items, preserve your babies and learn for yourself why our elected representatives can't seem to do this themselves.

The line items presented are based on real budget-balancing proposals of various organizations and commissions, according to the website. When your cursor hovers over a particular item, a very brief explanation displays the item's purpose. The figures are calculated by groups, including the [Bipartisan Policy Center for Debt Reduction Task Force](#) and the [Congressional Budget Office](#).

I ran the calculator several times, with some interesting results. One is that I always ran out of deficit before I ran out of line items to delete. Maybe I'm a conservative after all! Another surprise was the relatively miniscule cost of some programs (public broadcasting \$0.5 billion and farm subsidies \$1 billion each) and the astronomically significant costs of others. Military costs of Iraq and Afghanistan through 2015 is \$113 billion. Continuing 2001-03 era tax cuts is \$276 billion — almost half the deficit.

On my first try, I clicked through the first few screens and saved \$618.8 billion — nearly \$10 billion more than needed. But since I didn't even reach the last screen, I started over. This time I deep-sixed this way:

- » Freeze government civilian employee pay for three years.
- » End earmarks.
- » End farm subsidies.
- » Enact the military's proposed efficiencies initiative.

- » Cancel “Grow the Army” initiative.
- » Reduce defense contract by 4 percent.
- » Replace F-35 Joint Strike Fighter Jets with F-16 and F-18s for Air Force, Navy and Marines.
- » Raise Part B Medicare premiums from 25 percent to 35 percent of costs.
- » Cap malpractice insurance and lawsuits.
- » Raise Social Security payroll tax cap to \$230,000 now.
- » Enact carbon tax or cap-and-trade.
- » Enact 1-cent-per-ounce obesity tax on manufacture and importation of sweetened beverages.
- » Convert mortgage deduction to tax credit.
- » Allow Pension Benefit Guaranty Corp. to raise corporate fees to cover growing deficit.
- » Increase gas tax 25 cents per gallon.
- » Allow 2001 and 2003 tax cuts to expire.

This iteration saved us taxpayers \$649.8 billion. Success with more than \$40 billion to spare!

I would like to adjust a few features of the program. You can't adjust the numbers, cutting military and defense by \$56 billion, for example, instead of \$113 billion. You can't dictate preserving an item if they'll make some change, such as allotting the \$5 billion in student loan money only if they make sure old loans plus penalties are collected to cycle to new students as intended. Another improvement would be to order the items randomly with each site access, so that end-of-the-list items don't benefit from not being noticed.

I'm sure the output of this game would be useful to our elected representatives. But I guess we'd understand their struggle only if we were forced to complete this cooperatively with, say, our family. If yours is like my husband's and my families,

any group of more than three of us would require some complex horse trading to agree on a budget.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at www.CanyonVoices.com.*