

# "What a Balanced Budget Amendment Would Mean for America"

By Senator Edward M. Kennedy  
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**I** OPOSED THE PROPOSED BALANCED BUDGET CONSTITUTIONAL amendment, because it is unnecessary and unwise to write a balanced budget requirement into the Constitution. It is obvious why the Republican majority scheduled consideration of the balanced budget amendment now, so early in this new Congress.

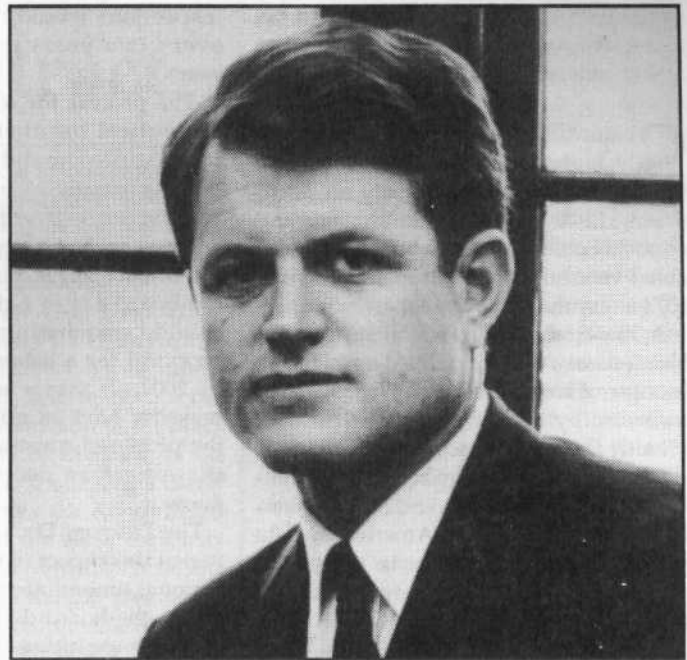
The Republican majority wants to pass the constitutional amendment before more pressure builds for them to explain how they would achieve the balance. The more the American people understand this "leap before you look" strategy, the less the people like it. The House Republican Majority Leader has already admitted to this strategy. Congressman Arney, a strong supporter of the proposed constitutional amendment, said that if Members of Congress know what it takes to comply with the requirement, "their knees will buckle." He also is reported to have said that "putting together a detailed list beforehand would make passing the balanced budget amendment virtually impossible."

Instead of devoting the time and effort to craft a responsible budget, the Republican majority asks us to amend the Constitution now, ask questions later. But the Constitution has served this Nation through wars, economic depressions and other crises far worse than the current budget deficit. Amending the Constitution should be the considered option of last resort, not the expedient course of first resort.

For that reason, I commend Senator Daschle's proposed amendment to insure that the constitutional amendment will not take effect unless Congress first passes a resolution specifying in detail how the budget would be balanced by 2002. The American people, and their elected representatives in the State legislatures have a fundamental right to know how this constitutional amendment would affect their lives.

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that a total of \$1.2 trillion in deficit reduction will be required to balance the budget by the year 2002. And that total does not include the tax cuts called for by the Republican Contract With America, which would raise the total of cuts required to \$1.5 trillion.

If Social Security, Defense and interest on the national debt are excluded from the deficit-cutting calculations, all other federal programs will have to be cut by 22% to achieve a balanced budget in 2002. And if the tax cuts in the Contract with America are included, all other federal programs will have to



*Senator Kennedy upon first being elected to the Senate*

be cut by 30%. That's a 30 percent cut in spending on Medicare, Medicaid, veterans benefits, student loans, farm benefits, and all other federal programs. The American people have a right to know if that is how the Republican majority will balance the budget.

Across-the-board thirty percent cuts would have a disastrous impact on children, the elderly, and hard-working families throughout the United States. Here are just a few examples:

- Over 220,000 children would be unable to enroll in Head Start early childhood programs.
- Over 200,000 families would lose the child care subsidies that enable parents to work or attend school.
- 1.9 million students would lose the opportunity for remedial education through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.
- 3,000 teachers would lose their jobs, dramatically increasing class sizes in many school districts.

**T**o achieve the necessary cuts, the House Budget Committee has already proposed that the federal government should stop paying the interest on student loans while students are in college or professional school. Middle-class students on the full available amount of such loans would owe over \$3000 in additional interest at the end of four years of college. Instead of \$17,000 in loans to pay back, they would have to pay back over \$20,000.

If those same needy students were to attend medical school and continue to borrow the full amount available, they would owe over \$16,000 in additional interest at the end of medical school. A debt that would be \$51,000 under current law would climb to a debt of \$67,000.

If Pell grants are slashed by thirty percent, eligible students would receive a maximum of \$1,560, a fraction of the \$8000 it now costs to attend many state universities. Many students could not even afford community college at this reduced level

actually clamoring for." (Drucker 61)

So Democrats need to get themselves out from under the avalanche of blame for all the bad things government has done and start championing the good things. They need to be the *real* alternative to politics-as-usual: let's forget liberal-conservative name-calling and discuss functional versus non-functional government. Such a middle *is* possible: a significant faction inside the Republican party, which includes Christine Todd Whitman and William Weld, have been quietly moving this way, away from the mainstream of their party. (Lind 20) The Democrats need to beat them to it.

In order to do so, though, the Democrats will have to come to terms with a split at the center of their party, one which has been roundly blamed for the Bill Clinton fiasco: that between Old and New Democrats. FDR (God rest his soul) was *the* Old Democrat. Today, we know a lot more about activist government than he did. We know a lot about what kinds of programs are effective. Wherever possible, we have learned, support should go to private programs that do the job better than a government program would - such as private homeless shelters, notoriously better run than the sorry excuses that are city shelters. But we have to recognize, at the same time, that private facilities are few, underfunded, and subject to overload and collapse in times of crisis. Such a pragmatic approach, working on the activist (liberal) base but enthusiastically acknowledging conservative criticisms, is that of a New Democrat.

The New Democrat school is best embodied by the Democratic Leadership Council, which spawned and has recently repudiated Clintonism. Currently chaired by Al From, (and chaired in the past by the likes of Sam Nunn and Chuck Robb) the DLC has been adamant from the mid-eighties that Democrats must distance themselves from traditional liberalism. They have rejected the us-versus-them rationale behind the Democratic coalition and attempted to focus on ideas such as community and social responsibility as opposed to the self-centered individualism of the Republicans. The DLC has promoted such programs as a national service for youths and has redesigned government, and welfare reform. While Democrats certainly don't have to embrace this agenda to recognize the logic behind such a re-envisioning for their party.

With these stipulations - effective government (not more *or* less), "community,

patriotism, and social responsibility" (over traditional class warfare), and compassion for the plight of the blue-collar working man in the information age, Democrats could begin to form their own agenda, not necessarily a contract but a set of tenets of opposition. Such a set might include some of the following (Marshall):

1) aggressive preparation of blue-collar workers for more technology-based jobs, accomplished primarily through a vouchers-for-training system that would send individuals to private institutions - an updated GI bill;

2) insistence that drug dependency, lack of skills, and a minimum wage that is lower than welfare benefits, not welfare itself, are responsible for the crisis of poverty, illegitimacy, and gang warfare that paralyze the poorest Americans - and proposals that attack these problems - a higher minimum wage, more work programs for those coming off of welfare, etc.;

3) help for working families: an expanded EITC, tax credits for children such as those recently passed for high-income bracket individuals to all Americans, and tax cuts for private employers that provide day care and reasonable maternity leave;

4) a return to the Health Care Reform Nightmare with plans to institute a more competitive (less regulatory) schema, forcing Republicans to confront a proposed system that functions like their much-loved free market;

5) Re-envisioning of the military less as an anti-nuclear force than as an anti-guerrilla one, and steps to approach that reality;

6) On foreign policy, clear support for struggling democracies (a luxury we did not have during the cold war), and friendship to nations that serve as buffer zones for us from the most serious threats (Turkey, for instance, the only stable democracy in the middle east that is waging a semi-successful fight against Muslim fundamentalism).

7) Unqualified support for a clear favorite: anything that benefits kids. That includes the federal free lunch program as well as vastly improved educational funding and programs for all kids, not just those in the suburbs;

8) Anti-crime programs that aim at *stopping* crime from happening, instead of just locking up more people: this includes midnight basketball along with more beat cops, and *must* include better gun control, a clear favorite with the American people, whatever the NRA is whispering in Bob Dole's ear;

9) An end to subsidies of any kind to agribusiness and private transportation companies - free trade in action;

10) A justice system that is convincingly just: this means converting the exclusionary rule into damages for

those whose civil rights were violated, but not a get-out-of-jail free card, as well as significant changes to the plea-bargaining process.

This is by no means an exclusive list, nor one even aimed at countering Gingrich's Contract. These are simply examples of the kind of agenda that winning Democrats will have to pursue. Without such a cohesive vision, Democrats should be content to gnash their teeth and get heard less and less for the foreseeable future

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"Carry the battle to them. Don't let them bring it to you. Put them on the defensive. Don't ever apologize for anything."

-Harry Truman

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