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Blame Time on the Budget

IT'S BLAME time in the budget talks. Perhaps you sensed it would come to this. It has never been essential in a legal or parliamentary sense that the parties agree to a budget-balancing bill this Congress. They could always put the matter off, just as they have so often in the past. Given their differing views of whether and how the business ought to be accomplished, the goal of both has therefore been to give up as little policy ground as possible while maneuvering to avoid the blame in the event negotiations failed.

The closer the election comes without an agreement, the more important this part of the balancing act becomes—and besides, it's good bargaining tactics to try to make the other side look unreasonable. That's why the president went to such lengths to say the other day that he'd already agreed to a balanced budget but the Republicans persist in wanting more. That's why the Republicans a couple of dance steps before that emphasized how far they had come from their original tax and spending cuts. There is nothing in either party but large-minded statesmen—and that, of course, is why the budget talks have broken down.

The fact is that both the Republicans and the president can claim to have come a long way. But because their starting points were so far out of bounds, that doesn't mean a lot. The Republican tax cut is not as large as it was but still much larger than it ought to be; there shouldn't be a tax cut, period. The entitlement cuts are likewise smaller than they were—but still enough to tear apart the basic forms of federal assistance to the poor. The president has similarly moved a fair distance if you recall, as he prefers not to do these days, that he began the cycle by proposing no serious deficit reduction at all. A year ago he was content to have the government

continue to add to the national debt at a rate approaching \$1 trillion a presidential term. In the summer he then converted to a balanced budget in 10 years, using administration economic and other assumptions. Then came seven years if it could be done protecting his priorities; then seven years using not administration assumptions but the less favorable and more demanding ones on which the Republicans were insisting.

A lot of Democrats think the seven-year budgets particularly conceded too much by way of spending cuts, and no matter that the most recent one using congressional assumptions avoids the important spending cuts that need to occur; it gets to balance through accounting confections instead. In the House particularly, it isn't clear the most recent plan could get a majority even of Democratic votes, and for their own reasons the Republicans scorn it as well. Some commentators say even so that the two sides are close. If so, they are doing a pretty good job of disguising it. In part to pay for their tax cuts, the Republicans want to make deeper cuts in the programs for the poor than the president—rightly—is willing to countenance. But the alternative is to make deeper cuts in Medicare and Social Security, the programs for the elderly middle class, and the president and the Democrats aren't willing to countenance that, either.

The parties now say perhaps they ought to take their differences into the election. Let the voters decide. But our own sense is that the voters most likely won't clearly decide; their verdicts in most recent years have tended to be mixed. They elect officials to do the deciding for them; then the officials don't. The budget is less the problem than the political failure that year after year produces the budget.