

The cost of tomorrow

I am a public spending hawk. It is the top mission of the federal government to serve and protect the American people.

Of course this takes many forms: our national defense, shaping our economic destiny, providing a safety net for our citizens who need a hand up, not a handout.

But let's call it. On spending, America has lost its way, and it has been happening for decades.

The federal debt is vastly out of whack. Most Americans greet this with a shrug and wonder, does it affect them? In fact, yes it does — or better stated, it will.

Our total national debt is \$37.41 trillion. There are approximately 342.4 million Americans, meaning each one's share of this debt is \$109,000. The annual interest payments on this debt total \$879.9 billion. That's more than the cost of Medicare or national defense, and second only to Social Security.

Even by fiscal hawks' standards, debt is not a sin. The sin is that our debt is so large that it currently exceeds our Gross Domestic Product (GDP) — the monetary measure of the total market value of all the final goods and services produced over a period of time — by 19.4%.

As a country, we owe more than we earn. Some debt is fine if the economy is growing at a rate that can sustain it, but what we're seeing is reckless, unchecked spending.

A threat to future generations

Even this level of federal debt is not considered unsustainable with GDP. However, it is approaching a level that could lead to significant economic challenges.

This increase is driven by a mismatch between federal revenues and spending, as well as the growth of Social Security and Medicare spending. The accumulation of federal debt and high interest rates will push borrowing costs higher, crowding out investments in other priorities.

By any measure, this has graduated beyond a simple talking point for economists and policy wonks. Rather, it's a looming reality with direct consequences for future generations.

My staff has heard me mention the adage, "bad news does not get better with time." It's time for that tough conversation. As the U.S. national debt surpasses \$35 trillion and continues to grow, it's becoming increasingly clear that our choices today will profoundly impact the economic freedom, stability, and opportunity we leave to our children and grandchildren.

For decades, policymakers have kicked the can down the road, borrowing to fund spending priorities without seriously addressing the long-term fiscal imbalance. While deficit spending can be a valuable tool during recessions or national emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, its persistent use during periods of economic growth has undermined its legitimacy and sustainability.

The U.S. government is now running trillion-dollar deficits annually, even in relatively stable times. The Congressional Budget Office projects that the federal debt held by the public will reach 181% of GDP by 2053 if current policies continue. That kind of fiscal trajectory is not just unsustainable, but dangerous.

The most immediate concern is the burden this debt places on future taxpayers. The federal government borrows by issuing Treasury securities, which must be repaid with interest. As interest rates rise, the cost of servicing the debt increases. That means that a growing share of tax revenue will be used not to invest in education, infrastructure, or innovation, but simply to pay for past borrowing.

This will restrict the government's ability to respond to future challenges. Climate change, technological disruption, health-care costs, and geopolitical instability will all demand substantial public investment. If future leaders are handcuffed by the need to service past debt, they'll face stark choices: cut essential programs, raise taxes sharply, or borrow even more.

Is it ethical to spend like this?

Beyond the economic and fiscal consequences, there's a deeper ethical issue at play. A persistent federal deficit represents a failure to live within our means — and worse, a decision to pass the bill for today's consumption on to those who



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haven't even had a say in the matter.

Imagine a family continually living beyond its means, racking up credit card debt while leaving their children to deal with the eventual bankruptcy. On a national scale, that's precisely what's happening.

There is also the matter of national security. A heavily indebted nation becomes more vulnerable to external shocks and less flexible in its response. China, one of America's chief geopolitical rivals, holds over \$800 billion in U.S. Treasury securities. While this interdependence has not yet proven destabilizing, it introduces risk. If foreign confidence in the U.S. fiscal outlook were to wane, it could trigger a sell-off of U.S. debt, weakening the dollar and causing borrowing costs to spike.

Critics of deficit hawkery argue that focusing too much on the deficit could lead to unnecessary austerity and underinvestment in critical areas like education, health-care, and green technology. This is a valid concern. We saw this with DOGE. Hatchets and a failure to understand, fundamentally, how the federal government works does not solve problems — it just makes us bleed.

I am a product of the U.S. Senate, and my boss, former U.S. Senator Bob Packwood (R-Oregon), hit the issue head on. What did he focus on? Prioritizing deficit reduction over tax cuts, entitlement reform, spending cuts, program restructuring, tax reform, and limits on tax breaks — all with a balanced budget as the ultimate goal.

There is a path back to sanity. Kicking the can down the road puts our children and grandchildren at risk. Congress must act like the adult and solve this growing problem. ©