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## Bush's Budget Battle

By George F. Will

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Anyone, said T.S. Eliot, could carve a goose, were it not for the bones. Anyone could write a sensible federal budget were it not for the bones -- the sturdy skeleton of existing programs defended by muscular interests. In President Bush's struggle to carve the federal carcass, bet on the bones.

Not that his "lean" (his adjective) and "austere" (John McCain's) \$2.57 trillion budget is anything of the sort. It proposes spending 38 percent more than the government was spending when Bush became president. It would slice off only thin slivers here and there: Remember, entitlements and interest are two-thirds of the budget and discretionary domestic spending is just 17 percent. It calls for a 3.6 percent *increase* over last year's spending total. Discretionary spending unrelated to security is slated to decrease only 0.7 percent. The net cut of 1 percent of the Education Department's budget is a mere nick to a budget that has grown 40 percent under Bush.

The proposed cut in agriculture spending is supposed to illustrate the budget's austere leanness. Well.

For 10,000 years -- 100 centuries -- agriculture was what most people did. In the 20th century that changed, at least in developed countries, which is essentially why they are called "developed." So why is America's 21st-century agriculture so absurdly -- so uniquely among all sectors of economic activity - - swaddled in government protections?

Rich Lowry, editor of National Review, notes that in the past two years agriculture subsidies, which you might think are supposed to cushion farms in hard times, increased 40 percent while farm income was doubling. The new budget's risible proposal -- a 9.6 percent cut -- is, in a dreary sense, a Republican improvement. In August 1986, at the Illinois State Fair, Ronald Reagan's 11-minute speech was interrupted 15 times by applause for boasts such as these:

"No area of the budget, including defense, has grown as fast as our support of agriculture." And: "This year alone we'll spend more on farm support programs . . . than the total amount the last administration provided in all its four years."

Today's president, the first since John Quincy Adams to serve a full term without vetoing anything, last week announced the limit of his tolerance: He vowed to veto a spending *decrease*. That is the unmistakable meaning of his statement that he would brook no changes in his prescription drug entitlement, which by itself has an unfunded liability twice as large as the entire Social Security deficit.

To pass this new entitlement, the largest expansion of the welfare state since the enactment of Medicare in 1965, Republican leaders had to traduce House rules by holding the vote open for three hours while they browbeat members who were balking at the \$400 billion cost over 10 years. It is virtually certain

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that the bill would not have passed if today's cost projection -- at least \$724 billion -- had been known. This experience will condition conservatives' responses to policy matters beyond the budget.

The Republican Study Committee, chaired by Rep. Mike Pence of Indiana, is an organization of 100 particularly adamant conservatives among House Republicans. Pence, for example, was one of just 12 Republicans who voted against both the prescription drug entitlement and the No Child Left Behind Act, because of its imposition of federal standards on elementary education, a quintessentially state and local responsibility.

When the RSC met in Baltimore a couple of weeks ago to enumerate its priorities, its list included "maintaining local control of secondary education." That may seem an anodyne sentiment; actually, it is a shot across the Bush administration's bow. It is code for: Enough centralization -- we oppose the president's plan for extending federal standards to high schools. Thirty-four House Republicans voted against No Child Left Behind in 2001. More might oppose the administration's planned extension of its sweep.

The administration is fighting to advance its version of big-government conservatism -- measures such as voluntary personal accounts carved out of Social Security to strengthen conservative values such as self-reliance, and to strengthen conservative factions such as the investor class. But the administration may find itself waging two political wars at once.

One, already raging, is with Democrats. They favor big-government liberalism to strengthen liberal values such as equality in an ethic of common provision under Social Security as it is, and liberal factions such as the welfare state's public employees who administer the common provisions. The other war may be with small-government -- more precisely, limited-government -- conservatives. This may be less a war than an insurgency, but the terminological distinction, in today's context, is not comforting.

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