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Senate Passes Budget Bill and Sends It to Obama

NY Times

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WASHINGTON — The Senate approved a crucial bipartisan budget agreement early on Friday that would avert a government default and end nearly five years of pitched battles between congressional Republicans and the Obama administration over fiscal policy.

The measure, which was approved 64 to 35, now goes to the White House, where President Obama has said he will sign it.

“This agreement is a reminder that Washington can still choose to help, rather than hinder, America’s progress,” Mr. Obama said in a statement.

The Senate vote, held in the dead of night, was perhaps a fitting cap to the clashes between Republicans and the White House, which many warned had put the United States on the edge of economic calamity and which, in 2013, forced a 16-day shutdown of the federal government.

Unlike the 2013 fight, in which Republicans ultimately surrendered and conceded defeat in trying to force a repeal of Mr. Obama’s health care law, this week’s budget accord was largely a draw.

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The deal would increase spending by \$80 billion over two years and raise the federal debt ceiling, averting a default that the Treasury had warned would happen early next week. It was approved in the House on Wednesday with the overwhelming support of Democrats, but with less than one-third of Republicans backing it.

The measure calls for corresponding budget cuts to avoid increasing the deficit, including reductions in Medicare payments to doctors and other health care providers. It also envisions savings from tighter eligibility requirements and other changes to a Social Security disability program.

Modest in scope, especially in the context of the nearly \$4 trillion annual budget, the accord represents a significant breakthrough.

While Congress must still adopt spending bills for the next two years, the bill would substantially reduce the risk of a government shutdown by setting spending targets for two years and allowing Congress to return to its regular appropriations process.

It will also allow the newly installed House speaker, Representative Paul D. Ryan of Wisconsin, a clean start in which he can focus on mending deep divisions among House Republicans.

Senate leaders in each party had expressed support for the measure.

“This agreement isn’t perfect,” the majority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, said in a floor speech. “I share some concerns other colleagues have raised. But here’s the bottom line: This is a fully offset agreement that rejects tax hikes, secures long-term savings through entitlement reforms and provides increased support for our military — all this at a time when we confront threats in multiple theaters.”

Mr. McConnell added, “I hope senators will join me in voting for it.” Enough did.

But some of his fellow Republican senators, including two presidential candidates — Rand Paul of Kentucky and Ted Cruz of Texas — were fiercely opposed. The rare overnight voting, beginning with a 1 a.m. procedural measure and ending with final passage shortly after 3 a.m., was a consequence of the bitter disagreement among Republicans.

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The critics said that many of the cuts were gimmicks and that the package over all would add to the nation's debt.

They also said that it would breach spending-cap agreements they considered a much-needed step toward responsible cost controls. Democrats have long called for lifting the caps, which they say have put a drag on the economy and blocked needed investments in infrastructure and other programs.

“Ultimately, there was something passed called sequestration, which put caps on both military and domestic spending, and it did slow down the rate of growth of government for a little while,” Mr. Paul said in a speech. “This is the problem with Congress. Congress will occasionally do something in the right direction, and then they take one step forward and two steps back.”

Senator James Lankford, Republican of Oklahoma, said people in his state did not buy arguments in favor of the budget accord. “It was announced by the White House today that this is a great job-creating achievement,” he said, “but all they see is more spending and no change in the status quo.”

Mr. Lankford criticized two of the spending cuts as illusions. One, he said, would slightly move up the due date of pension insurance premiums to the federal government. That would allow the money to be captured within the 10-year window used for budget-scoring purposes.

“Yes, it adds \$2.3 billion into the 10-year window,” he said. “It’s actually zero savings. It’s not real. They moved a payment a month and said it’s a pay-for. It’s not a pay-for.”

Mr. Lankford said another part of the plan would divert \$1.5 billion from a fund to compensate crime victims. “Apparently, this budget agreement qualifies, though, as a victim of crime, because \$1.5 billion is taken from the Victims Crime Fund and dedicated not to victims of crime but to spending in other areas,” he said.

Supporters of the measure said it represented a true bipartisan compromise in that neither side was fully satisfied.

The Senate Democratic leader, Harry Reid of Nevada, applauded the passage of the bill.

“Today’s vote is a victory for bipartisanship and for the American people,” Mr. Reid said in a statement after the vote. “Together,

Democrats and Republicans have proven that, when partisan agendas are set aside, we can find common ground for the common good.”

GOP explores way around Obama's nuclear waste decision

The Washington Examiner

October 28, 2015

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Republicans are looking for a side door to open the nuclear waste dump at Yucca Mountain in Nevada, after President Obama scrapped the project in his first term.

Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., ran an energy subcommittee hearing Wednesday on low-level nuclear waste, but wants the Department of Energy to broaden discussions it is having with Nevada to include opening a storage facility at Yucca for higher-level nuclear fuel waste from power plants.

"The Department of Energy carefully and constructively engaged with the state of Nevada to provide for a mixed low-level waste disposal site at the Nevada National Security Site, adjacent to Yucca Mountain," Shimkus said. "We should consider how these conversations between the federal government and Nevada can continue to advance the development of a deep, geologic repository for used fuel."

He said the Department of Energy entered into a broad agreement with the state recently to begin accepting low-level waste at the adjacent facility. States do not have a place to store their low-level waste after last year's fire at a Department of Energy waste facility in New Mexico.

Shimkus said the Energy Department was directed by Congress in 2005 "to examine disposal options" for the more dangerous forms of low-level waste and make recommendations to Congress. But "Congress has not yet received any ... recommendation."

He said the problem would have been moot if the Obama administration had not canceled the Yucca Mountain permanent waste site. "However, DOE walked away from the most practical disposal pathway for [this dangerous] waste when President Obama quit work on the Yucca Mountain project."

A waste facility in Texas is taking some of the low-level waste, but

Texas lawmakers at the hearing said a more permanent solution is needed because the West Texas site has limited storage capability.

Nuclear workers to be honored in Richland

Tri-City Herald

October 28, 2015

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The National Day of Remembrance for nuclear weapons program workers will be observed Oct. 30 at the Richland Community Center.

The U.S. Senate passed a resolution designating the day for the seventh year to recognize the contributions and sacrifices made by the workers for the defense of the nation.

Cold War Patriots plans at observance with an invocation, posting of the colors and speakers from 1 to 3 p.m. at the community center, 500 Amon Park Drive.