

As debt limit discussions get closer and closer to the 11th hour in our nation's capital, many people are left to wonder where the bargain will be struck.

If the policymakers in this debate listen to the people they represent, they ought to understand that the request to put an end to runaway borrowing by the federal government is a reasonable one. It's also a nonpartisan one. I've heard from Missourians on both sides of the aisle about cutting spending and preserving programs like Medicare and Social Security for the near term and for the long term.

We ought to get two things straight so we can have an honest discussion. First, Republicans do not want to end Medicare and Social Security. Second, Democrats do not want to bankrupt our federal government (which would also end up bankrupting Medicare and Social Security).

Here are a few numbers I looked up myself. They didn't come from either side's talking points (and there are a lot of talking points circulating out there).

The federal government spent \$3,456,200,000,000 in 2010. Our federal deficit that year was \$1,293,500,000,000. We borrowed 37.5 cents of every dollar we spent, some of it from American investors (pensions, bondholders, mutual funds) and some of it from foreign investors (Japan, China, the United Kingdom).

Of our total federal budget, \$706,700,000,000 went for Social Security, \$451,600,000,000 went for Medicare, \$308,100,000,000 went for Medicaid. Defense accounted for \$847,200,000,000 in spending, transportation was \$92,000,000,000, and agriculture programs made up \$16,600,000,000. Interest on our national debt totaled \$196,000,000,000.

Those are intimidating numbers, to be sure, but there are real people behind every one of those accounts. They are retired Americans on Medicare, veterans, Social Security beneficiaries, farmers, truckers, families dropping their children off at school, taxpayers who are wealthy and taxpayers who are not so wealthy. And the real questions are these: how do we cut spending to stop borrowing and how do we spend smarter so as not to hurt any of these Americans?

We have to plan ahead while we can still afford to plan ahead. The House will soon pass a balanced budget amendment which says the federal government cannot spend more than it takes in. And a measure passed last week caps federal spending unless it is for (1) Social Security (2) Medicare (3) Veterans programs or (4) to avoid default on Treasury securities. We have also passed a budget which says now is the time to think about – just to think about – what Medicare should look like for new beneficiaries in ten years.

And let's have a national debate not about raising the debt limit, but about whether or not we think we can get a better deal. From pharmaceutical companies which sell prescription drugs to Medicare, from companies which sell the government office supplies, and from the federal bureaucracies which wield a huge amount of control over our lives and livelihoods. Can we get a better deal without cutting services? Without punishing our economy? Without making our future dependent on something as trifling as politics?