

Paul Ryan's make-believe budget

By Eugene Robinson

If Rep. Paul Ryan wants people to take his budget manifestos seriously, he should be honest about his ambition: not so much to make the federal government fiscally sustainable as to make it smaller.

You will recall that the Ryan Budget was a big Republican selling point in last year's election. Most famously, Ryan proposed turning Medicare into a voucher program. He offered the usual GOP recipe of tax cuts — to be offset by closing certain loopholes, which he would not specify — along with drastic reductions in non-defense “discretionary” spending.

If the plan Ryan offered had been enacted, the federal budget would not come into balance until 2040. For some reason, Republicans forgot to mention this detail in their stump speeches and campaign ads.

Voters were supposed to believe that Ryan was an apostle of fiscal rectitude. But his real aim wasn't to balance the budget. It was to starve the federal government of revenue. Big government, in his worldview, is inherently bad — never mind that we live in an awfully big country.

Ryan and Mitt Romney offered their vision, President Obama offered his, and Americans made their choice. Rather emphatically.

Now Ryan, as chairman of the House Budget Committee, is coming back with an ostensibly new and improved version of the framework that voters rejected in November. Judging by the preview he offered Sunday, the new plan is even less grounded in reality than was the old one.

Voters might not have focused on the fact that Ryan's original plan wouldn't have produced a balanced budget until today's high school students reached middle age, but the true deficit hawks in the House Republican caucus certainly noticed. They demanded a budget that reached balance much sooner. Hence Ryan's revised plan, which claims to accomplish this feat of equilibrium within a decade.

It will, in fact, do nothing of the sort, because it appears to depend on at least one ridiculous assumption and two glaring contradictions. That's for starters; ■■■ confident we'll see more absurdities when the full proposal is released soon.

Appearing on “Fox News Sunday,” Ryan said his plan assumes that the far-reaching reforms known as Obamacare will be repealed. Host Chris Wallace reacted with open disbelief: “That’s not going to happen.”

Indeed, to take Ryan seriously is to believe that legislation repealing the landmark Affordable Care Act would be approved by the Senate, with its Democratic majority, and signed by Obama. What are the odds? That’s a clown question, bro.

As he did in the campaign, Ryan attacked Obama’s health reforms for cutting about \$700 billion from Medicare over a decade, not by slashing benefits but by reducing payments to providers. Ryan neglected to mention that his own budget — the one he convinced the party to run on in 2012 — would cut Medicare by the same amount. Actually, by a little more.

This was hypocrisy raised to high art. How could anyone who claimed to be so very worried about the crushing federal debt blithely renounce \$700 billion in savings? Ryan suggested Sunday that once Obamacare is repealed, this money can be plowed back into Medicare. Which, as you recall, will never happen.

While Ryan’s new budget assumes that Obamacare goes away, it also assumes that the tax increase on high earners approved in the “fiscal cliff” deal remains in place. “That’s current law,” he said, as if Obamacare were not.

Ryan’s sudden respect for a tax increase that had to be — metaphorically — crammed down Republicans’ throats is easily explained. He needs the \$600 billion in revenue it produces to make his new fantasyland budget appear to reach balance.

Ryan is likely to reprise — and even augment — the hundreds of billions of dollars in cuts he proposed last year for social programs. He indicated that he still believes Medicare should be voucherized, although he objects to the word and insists that what he advocates is “premium support.” And he asserted that Obamacare’s expansion of Medicaid, the health-care program for the poor, is “reckless” — even as tea party-approved Republican governors such as Rick Scott of Florida announce their states’ participation.

From the evidence, Ryan cares less about deficits or tax rates than about finding some way to dramatically reduce the size of the federal government. He has every right to hold that view. But it’s hard to take him seriously as long as he refuses to come clean about his intentions.
