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## The new federal budget and higher ed

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# The new federal budget and higher ed

The Roman Empire was one of the largest and most powerful regimes in human history, despite its many faults. Most historians will agree that the causes of why that empire fell were a combination of factors including, but not limited to, the invasion by the Barbarians from the north, the loss of traditional values, and military over-spending.

Last week I reported in this column on how a fiscal shutdown of the federal government would affect higher education. Now that a two-year budget has passed, allowing the government to run until late March, we have a better idea of what is to be expected for higher education over the next 24 months. Last Monday President Trump sent Congress a \$4.4 trillion budget, which included drastic cuts in domestic programs and large increases in military spending. That, combined with the tax cuts recently enacted, has analysts agreeing that this plan will result in a \$7.1 trillion deficit over the next decade.

Let's examine this budget – and its potential effects on education – one step at a time.

The Congressional agreement, titled “The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018,” includes \$4 billion for what they call “student-centered programs that aid college completion and affordability.” Although this sounds good, there are very few details about this plan beyond that the measure will cover “programs that help police officers, teachers, and firefighters.” According to some politicians involved in this deal, including Sen. Patty Murray (D-Washington), this should help low-income students, first responders, and teachers to deal with the student-debt crisis. However, the lack of details means that we will have to sit and wait to understand what it

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really means.

Also, as reported in this column regarding how the new tax code was targeting private institutions of higher education for ideological reasons by taxing their endowments, there were some unintended victims of this anti-intellectualist move. One was Berea College.

Berea College is a small (about 1,600 students) liberal arts college. Founded in 1855, it was the first college below the Mason-Dixon Line to become coeducational and racially integrated. And today, it provides education free to its students. This generosity is made possible thanks to its large endowment (over \$1 billion).

Republicans seem obsessed with private colleges and universities that have large endowments, and what they see as their liberal agendas. As a result, these institutions were hit with a 1.5 percent tax on those endowments. Luckily for Berea, it is located in Kentucky (about 35 miles south of Lexington), which is the home state of Republican Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, who introduced a compromise in the senate plan.

Sen. McConnell also included a provision that authorizes the education secretary to exempt colleges from the potential loss of federal Title IV funds if they operate in economically distressed areas. That seems to be directed to help Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, whose students have a high loan-default rate. Sometimes it

pays to be in the right state.

Although the bill also provides \$100 million in relief for institutions in Puerto Rico, it does not provide any dollars for immigration or those enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, most of whom are now of college age.

But how about the new proposed White House budget?

To begin with, it does not embrace the budget passed by Congress as described above. Secondly, it keeps increasing the federal deficit well beyond what Congress wanted, and, obviously, well out of line with the Republican orthodoxy of balanced budgets. There is an extraordinary increase in military spending of \$195 billion over the next two years. That is shocking given that the U.S. already spends more on national defense than China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, the United Kingdom, India, France, and Japan combined. In fact, defense spending accounts for almost 16 percent of all U.S. federal spending.

Amidst all of this spending, ideology continues to drive budget cuts in other areas. For example, the fiscal 2019 proposed budget for the Environmental Protection Agency will represent a \$2.8 billion cut (or 34 percent) from its current level. How is it doing that? By virtually eliminating all climate change-related programs and cutting the agency's Office of Science and Technology by nearly half, from \$762 million to \$489 million.

The justification for these cuts is that the EPA will be refocusing on what it calls “core activities” and eliminating “lower priority programs.” Evidently for the White House, climate change – the worst environmental crisis in human history and whose economic and social

consequences will be disastrous for civilization – represents a “low priority.” Other programs facing reduction or complete elimination are those that promote partnerships with the private sector in dealing with climate change, the protection of marine estuaries (one of the most fragile ecosystems), and environmental education training.

Although most political observers believe that this budget proposal is unlikely to pass in its current form, it does reveal a number things about the current White House that are not that surprising.

One is an utter contempt for science, a feeling shared by most members of the Republican caucus. Another is the adamant position of ignoring climate change, which, for them, has become as bad a term as “Obamacare.” It also represents a reckless disregard for the well being of the citizens of this country and the world as a whole. As long as they keep certain sectors of corporate America and their base happy, why should they care?

Our country is facing now some of the very same threats that caused the collapse of the Roman Empire: military overspending, and the deterioration of traditional values, evident in the rejection of demonization of immigrants, and the outright hostility for knowledge. The Barbarians are again at the gate, only this time they are coming from within by occupying positions of power within government in its three branches.

Think about it.

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