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The Speech Obama Should Deliver – Now
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President Obama is setting himself up to lose the public debate over spending and a possible government shutdown because he is not giving the American people a clear sense of what's at stake for them.

On this issue, his language is vague and uninspiring – although he has threatened to veto the GOP spending plan if it clears Congress. He is not drawing clear distinctions, in ways that people will understand, between his approach to cutting spending and the Republican approach. Instead, he is simply saying that, like the GOP, he, too, wants to cut spending – just not as much. In fact, even with the continuing resolution set to expire next Friday, raising the distinct possibility of a shutdown, he's mostly focusing public attention on other matters, as his schedule and recent speeches make clear.

If he wants to win this battle, he needs to begin to shape the debate now, to sensitize Americans to what's at stake, to confront this issue not as an inside-the-Beltway squabble but, instead, as a symbol of everything that's right with him and wrong with the other party.

It calls for a White House event (indeed, one of many) that revolves around a particularly misguided Republican spending cut, which he would portray as a symbol of the GOP's misguided approach to public policy.

Here's the speech that he should give at such an event:

“Thank you, everyone.

“Thank you, Andrea Smith, for that wonderful introduction. Thank you, most of all, for explaining to all of us how important Pell Grants were in making sure that you could attend Dickinson College, a wonderful school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which is just a two-hour drive north from here.

“Your hard work and dedication, and the pride that you have brought to your parents as the first member of your family to attend college, are an inspiration to all of us – and we are confident that you will continue to do well in school and contribute to our nation in important ways after you graduate.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Andrea's chance to go to college, to get the education and skills that she will need to pursue the American Dream, is what this debate we're having with our Republican friends over the budget is all about.

“Don't be fooled by what you hear from the other side.

“The fight is not about whether to cut the deficit. We all want to do that. My budget would reduce deficits by more than \$1 trillion over the next decade, and I want to work with my Democratic and Republican friends in Congress to go much further so that we can fix our budget for the long term.

“The fight is not about cutting spending, either. My budget would save \$400 billion alone by freezing total domestic discretionary spending for the next five years and, within that category, making tough choices about which programs to keep and which ones to eliminate.

“But, there’s a right way and a wrong way to do all this.

“We can’t just cut everything that the federal government does, no matter what it happens to be, which is what the Republicans want to do. Let’s take a look at the Republican idea of how you cut spending.

“As you may know, the bill that is funding the government this year will run out next Friday, March 4. It will run out on March 4 because, late last year, Republicans in the Senate blocked an effort to pass a budget for the full year. They would only agree to a bill that would take us until next Friday.

“So, by Friday, we need to come together and fund the government for the rest of the year. I’m prepared to work with my friends in both parties to do that.

“But, let’s take a look at what the Republicans have in mind for the rest of the year.

“The Republican proposal to fund the government for the rest of the year, which passed the House last week, would cut Pell Grants – the very program that helped send Andrea Smith to college – by almost 25 percent, and it would cut the size of the Pell grant for all nine million students who currently get one.

“It would cut employment and training funds that help jobless workers find new jobs by more than half, which could deny help to almost two million of our fellow Americans who want to work but can’t find jobs.

“It would deny education, nutrition, and other services for more than 150,000 children up to age five who are at risk of falling behind because they come from poor families and they may not get a good meal at home.

“It would cut funds for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which tries to prevent disease, by more than 20 percent; it would cut funds for the Food and Drug Administration, which makes sure the drugs we take are safe, by 10 percent; and it would cut funds for the Food Safety and Inspection Service, which makes sure our food is safe, by almost 10 percent.

“Is this what our young kids need? What our students need? What our families need? Is it what we need to grow our economy, to provide a sense of safety and security for our families, to make us a better country?

“That’s what they want to do.

“And if they don’t get their way, they’re threatening to block any funding at all and shut down the government – which would mean that our veterans would not get their benefits, and people wouldn’t be able to apply for Social Security, and our parks would close.

“Do you know the last time that the federal government had to shut its doors? It was in the winter of 1995 and 1996, just after the Republicans had won control of both the House and the Senate.

“That’s what you get when Republicans take control.

“They cut the things we need to make our economy stronger. They cut the things we need to make sure that our children get a good start in life, that our students can go to college, and that people who want to work can find jobs.

“And when they don’t get their way, they shut down the government.

“That’s not what I want to do. I want to cut spending where we can, but I also want to invest where we must. And I’m not going to threaten the benefits of our veterans – to whom we owe so much – if I don’t get everything I want.

“We need to make some choices.

“We need to invest in education so that our young people have the skills to fill the jobs of the future. We need to invest in research so that it’s our people who make the discoveries of the future. We need to invest in infrastructure so that we can get the goods we produce to the places where people want to buy them, and so that our workers do not waste hour after hour on our clogged highways.

“I want to work with our Republican friends on that. But, let me be clear:

“I will veto any bill that cuts our commitment to education and training, which will make it harder to educate our children and put our people back to work.

“I will veto any bill that cuts our commitment to research, which will weaken our economy and our global leadership.

“I will veto any bill that cuts our commitment to infrastructure, which will keep our people on clogged highways rather than in laboratories.

“Republicans want to cut everything, whether it works or not, whether we need it or not, and whether it will make us a better country or not.

“I want to make choices, to cut what we should but also to invest in what we must in order to grow our economy and our country.

“Those are my principles. That’s what I’m fighting for. That’s what this budget fight is all about.

“And, on that, I will not yield.

“Thank you very much.”