

Statement of John Yarmuth to the House Budget Committee October 19, 2023

Chairman Arrington, ranking member Boyle, and members of the committee, I am honored to be here before the committee I once chaired to discuss proposals to create another, and I say that with purposeful skepticism, commission on the federal fiscal condition.

Having served in Congress during a period that saw at least four different attempts to assist Congress with doing one of its most fundamental jobs, I can only characterize this new commission proposal as the proverbial definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

I spent a large amount of time in 2018 as a member of the Joint Select Committee on Budget and Appropriations Process Reform, under the thoughtful leadership of Mr. Womack. I was constantly impressed with the seriousness of the committee's discussions and hearings. Many well meaning people, from inside and outside of Congress, offered their thoughts on how we could reform our budgeting and appropriations processes, primarily with the implicit goal of reducing our annual deficits and the national debt.

While some of the other members of that committee might take issue with my evaluation, I believe the process illuminated one fairly obvious but unavoidable truth: the problem is not the process; it's the people. In other words, if members of Congress are not willing to muster the determination and courage to take on our fiscal challenges, even the best ideas will never be implemented.

I would argue the same conclusion could be reached about the Domenici-Rivlin task force and the Simpson-Bowles Commission. Even those who think the 2011 Budget Control Act was effective must remember that the only reason it was enacted was because it avoided a default on our debt, and that virtually every year we waived the budget caps because they were impractical and unpopular, and there was bi-partisan relief when the law expired in 2021. Plus, the commission established under that act could not reach a consensus on any new course of action. And, by the way, the national debt doubled during the 10 years the budget caps of the 2011 Act were in effect.

Of course, every one of these efforts stems from the presumption that our debt and deficits are unsustainable. I heard that argument every one of the 16 years I served in this body.

I am sure that back during the Lincoln administration, when the national debt reached a billion dollars, people were warning that they were leaving an unsustainable burden on their grandchildren. I know they were saying that when the debt reached a trillion dollars during the Reagan years. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't know of one grandchild who has ever been asked to repay a penny of that debt. I have two young grandsons, and the last thing I worry about for them is that they will have to pay back some of the national debt.

If you believe, as most do, that it would be better for us not to have trillion dollar annual deficits and \$33 trillion in debt, the course of action is not a mystery. You either cut spending or raise revenues or both. Doing that is Congress's job, and not a commission's or task force's, nor even the bi-partisan, bicameral committee we had in 2018.

I would like to offer some other suggestions. Why not have the Oversight Committee actually do oversight on some of the more expensive government activities and see where money can be saved, rather than holding wasteful hearings on Hunter Biden?

Why not have the Ways and Means Committee meaningfully explore the Social Security and Medicare programs to see how their fiscal conditions can be strengthened?

Same with the Energy and Commerce Committee on the Medicaid program. And while they're at that one, dispassionately look at the oil subsidies that cost us billions. Same with sugar subsidies that not only have direct costs, but enormous indirect health care costs.

Finally, maybe this committee can actually analyze the national debt issue to determine whether the debt we have and will have is really unsustainable or not, and how we can judge that moving forward. It can't be just looking at a graph with a constantly rising line and getting scared.

One final thought is that commissions and task forces don't have souls. Hopefully members of Congress do. A government without a soul is not a functioning government, regardless of how much or how little it costs.

I look forward to your questions.