

# The budget battle's narrow terms

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

March 31, 2011



It's great to see David Beckmann [convince Mark Bittman](#) to join the [fast](#) against attempts to cut federal programs that help the poor and the hungry. Bittman's dismissal of the religious element of the effort by Bread for the World and others--"I doubt God will intervene here"--betrays his unfamiliarity with Christian thought. (I'm tempted to send him one of my ELCA "God's work, our hands" fridge magnets.) But thanks to Bittman's involvement, now even the *Nation* is giving the progressive evangelical effort [positive coverage](#).

I'm ambivalent about [using the prophets](#) to (somewhat awkwardly) prooftext a publicity stunt. It raises complicated questions about the relationship between a spiritual fast and a political hunger strike. But right now those questions seem a lot less important than the fact that apparently the only way to evade a government shutdown--[not such a great thing](#), though [there are worse things](#)--is for the Democrats to give the Republicans what they want: major cuts to non-defense discretionary spending. That would be devastating for a lot of vulnerable people.

There's nothing like a divided-government budget fight to highlight the insanity of U.S. politics. In a time of tenuous economic recovery, we should be having a serious debate about our complicated policy options. Do we need more stimulus before we turn to the deficit problem? If

not, should we tackle the deficit by cutting spending, raising taxes or some combination? If we go with just cuts, which parts of the budget should they come from?

Each of these is a serious and difficult question. But the national debate has largely glossed over them, skipping ahead to a focus on cuts to non-defense discretionary spending--the relatively small slice of the budget pie that happens to include lots of programs aimed at mitigating slightly the [staggering gap](#) (pdf) between the haves and have-nots. It's a conversation with narrow parameters: should we make deep cuts to this spending? Or should we make even deeper ones?

The White House recently floated an offer consisting of more than \$30 billion in total cuts. That's the amount the Republican leadership proposed as its opening bid, but a couple months later they [wouldn't even take it](#) as a compromise--because the White House offer consisted only mostly, instead of entirely, of cuts to discretionary spending. It's easy to forget that the Democrats control two of the three bodies of government involved here.

A sane national politics wouldn't pivot on a conversation that's ostensibly about the deficit but is limited to cuts to relatively small programs. It wouldn't take seriously the idea that you can somehow counteract the deficit by [neutering](#) a health-care reform law that actually saves the government money. It wouldn't make farm subsidies [sacrosanct](#).

Our elected officials [may still reach a compromise](#) that keeps the government from shutting down, something Democrats can praise for being less bad for poor people than it might have been. And I'm pleased that a bipartisan bill to establish an itemized tax receipt [was introduced](#) in the Senate; maybe it'll get a hearing once the dust settles. That [could bring some sanity](#) to how we talk about government spending.

But what will it take for our culture to [stop blaming](#) its most marginalized members for their own situation--and [punishing them](#) for problems they didn't cause?