

ONE HUNDRED TWELFTH CONGRESS
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Opening Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Line-by-line Budget Review”
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
October 5, 2011

I am not sure what this hearing is about. If it is about whether the Obama Administration has scrutinized the federal budget to eliminate wasteful spending, this is an important hearing and I support it. But if this hearing is a “gotcha” hearing to examine whether the Administration has actually done a “line-by-line” review of the federal budget, I reject its premise.

There is no question that the Obama Administration has carefully examined the federal budget to eliminate wasteful spending. The budget process each year involves close review by each agency of its spending needs.

Through its “terminations, reductions, and savings” review, the Obama Administration has recommended cuts in hundreds of programs totaling over \$60 billion.

But if the question is whether there has been a literal “line-by-line” review of the federal budget, which Republican members say the President promised, I am afraid my colleagues have misunderstood a figure of speech.

The phrase “reading line by line” in American English is commonly understood to mean “performing a careful review.” Likewise, “meeting you halfway in a negotiation” – which seems to be a forgotten art in this Congress – does not mean that you literally have to move your chairs closer together. And “bridging our differences” – another devalued skill – does not involve major construction projects.

And I know we’re going to “get down to brass tacks” because our first witness is Mr. Brass. “Getting down to brass tacks” doesn’t mean what some people might have thought it meant when the furniture industry developed the term brass tacks. It means getting down to the facts and reality.

These are all figures of speech. I hope we have not arrived at the absolute bottom of political discourse in which the Oversight Subcommittee is checking to see if the President's figures of speech are literally true.

Unfortunately, I think the most important question we need to ask is why our budget system has become so dysfunctional. And the answer, I believe, will be found here in Congress, not in the White House.

Let's take a brief look at how Republicans have handled the budget in this Congress.

First there was the promise from the Speaker at the beginning of his term that there would be no omnibus appropriation. He told the American Enterprise Institute that he would do away with "comprehensive bills." At another point he said that the House would do all separate appropriations bills and that "2,000-page bills are not in anyone's interest."

Yet today we are operating on the heels of a four-day continuing resolution, which will be followed by a six-week continuing resolution, which will be followed by an omnibus appropriation—if we're lucky.

Then there was the debt ceiling stand-off. Every Republican and Democratic economic and financial observer said that this ceiling had to be lifted to preserve the American credit-rating and not rattle markets. Instead, the Republicans held the ceiling hostage until default was imminent, using it for negotiation leverage and headline value.

And now there is the Super-Committee. For members who say they want a line-by-line review of the budget and for a party that claims it doesn't want omnibus bills because they're too big to review, it seems pretty strange that the Super-Committee is the method that has been adopted. This process sweeps past all authorizing Committee consideration and all amendments and input from members of Congress.

If it is successful, the Super-Committee will create a giant omnibus bill—bigger than any before—and give us perhaps three weeks to read it but not change it, not even to offer changes. If it fails, it will produce an across-the-board cut in programs that could be accomplished by a pocket calculator but that will reflect no public policy, no economic realities, and no sense of justice and fairness.

I hope the Super-Committee process achieves positive results. But if we are really serious about ensuring sound fiscal policy for our nation, Congress needs to take a long hard look in the mirror. I believe that examining ways to "meet halfway" and "bridge differences" would take us a lot further than examining whether the President did a "line-by-line" budget review.

I remember a conversation I had with my son when he was quite little, and we had to explain to him that "stopping on a dime" did not mean we literally stopped for a dime. There are figures of speech and expressions, and I'm pleased now that the Oversight Subcommittee has become the arbiter of whether people are actually "stopping on a dime," "getting down to brass

tacks,” literally reading a budget “line-by-line.” This is a wonderful exercise and I only wish the cameras were here so the American people could see what Congress has come to.