

# Where would you be without a national debt?

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

Former U.S. Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, couldn't pass an amendment to the U.S. Constitution requiring a balanced budget.

State lawmakers have consistently fallen short of forcing the nation into its second constitutional convention for the purpose of drafting a balanced budget amendment.

Recently, U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, told the Tribune's William L. Spence that he has taken up Craig's baton.

But have you ever wondered where you'd be under a balanced budget amendment?

Selling apples on street corners.

And speaking German.

How do you think the United States avoided complete economic collapse during the Great Depression?

By borrowing enough money to keep the country afloat. By the end of the 1930s, the debt rose to 40 percent of gross domestic product.

And where did the U.S. find the money needed to defeat Germany and Japan during World War II?

By resorting to credit.

When the war ended in 1945, the national debt was 108.7 percent of GDP. In other words, the debt was greater than the economy.

By the turn of the century, the debt dropped to about 31.4 percent of GDP. Then came Sept. 11, the Bush-era tax cuts and two wars. The debt was growing past 35 percent of GDP when the Great Recession hit in 2008, driving the financial obligations toward 70 percent of the nation's economic output.

Even so, federal stimulus spending merely softened the damage state spending cuts - mandated by their own balanced budget requirements - inflicted on the teetering economy.

To become the law of the land, an amendment needs two-thirds of the House and Senate, and three-quarters of the state legislatures. To get enough votes, members of Congress and state lawmakers are going to require some flexibility to allow the country to fight its wars and prevent economic calamities.

So, if you're lucky, you end up with a meaningless gimmick.

The problem is, once you put something into the Constitution, the courts start interpreting it.

So do you hold up military action until the U.S. Supreme Court gives the green light?

And how do you define a balanced budget? Is it the spending blueprint - or the actual results? The economy is a moving target. If it falters, tax revenues decline while the costs of social programs rise.

And how would the courts define economic output - when even the experts are constantly revising the numbers?

That's the problem with a balanced budget amendment. If it's taken seriously, the country is constantly reacting to what has already happened.

No less than the Concord Coalition, which has been sounding the alarm about how a legacy of tax cuts and profligate social programs will drive the debt even higher in the years ahead, takes a dim view of a balanced budget amendment.

If you want to fix this problem, you don't need an amendment.

You need more politicians with the courage to raise taxes and cut spending.

Crapo knows that.

He's one of them. - M.T.