

Battle of big spenders goes to GWB over LBJ

Good morning everyone, and welcome to Prof. Fagin's Fun Quiz! Today's category is "LBJ or George W. Bush?" We're going to see if you can tell the difference between a big-spending liberal Democrat and a tight-fisted conservative Republican.

Here's our first question. Which president's administration saw the largest increase in federal spending in history: LBJ or George W. Bush?

"That's easy. Everybody knows that was LBJ and his Great Society!"

Bzzz, wrong answer. According to the Office of Management and Budget Web site (www.gpoaccess.gov/usbudget/fy06/), annual increases in federal spending for the past four years of the Bush administration were \$148 billion, \$149 billion, \$132 billion and a whopping \$187 billion. Johnson's total spending increase over all five of his budgets was just \$65 billion.

"But professor, that's not fair. The economy is a lot bigger now and there are more dollars floating around. Why don't you take that into account?"

Great question! Which president's spending as a percentage of the American economy was higher: LBJ or George W. Bush?

"Um, LBJ?"

Nope, sorry. Bush's average annual spending as a percent of GDP was 19.4 percent, versus 18.8 percent for LBJ. But keep trying, I'm sure you'll do better with this next one:

Which president oversaw the highest annual rate of growth for government spending since 1960?

"I know, I know! George W. Bush!"

Actually that was LBJ. He increased government spending by about 5.7 percent a year. Bush is a close second, though, at 5 percent. Just in case you're curious, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton rank way below him.

"All right, professor, I see where this is going. But what about Sept. 11 and the War on Terror? What about entitlement programs, where spending is mandated by law? That's got to be taken into account somehow."

You're absolutely right. You must be reading my cue cards! When you take out defense spending, entitlement spending and homeland security spending, who is a bigger spender: LBJ or George W. Bush?

"That's got to be LBJ."

Nope. I only wish it were. Bush outdoes LBJ in this category too: 4.8 percent average increase per year in office, versus 4.1



OPINION

BARRY FAGIN

Contributing columnist

percent for Johnson.

Surprisingly, Bush isn't the biggest budget-busting buckaroo for this category. That honor goes to Richard Nixon. But don't think all Republican presidents are big spenders. Ronald Reagan actually managed to cut discretionary spending, the only president in modern history to do so.

Try this one: Which of these presidents never vetoed a single bill while in office: LBJ or George W. Bush?

You're probably afraid to guess at this point, so I'll just tell you: that's Bush, too. LBJ vetoed about 30 bills when he was in the White House. GWB has so far signed every bill passed by Congress. For his last four budgets, Congress increased spending levels even higher than what he asked for. Bush approved every one.

There's something else Bush and LBJ have in common: A Congress controlled by their own party. LBJ had a Democratic Congress, George W. Bush a Republican one, but the result was the same.

When one party gains control of both the executive and legislative branches, it loses control of itself. Flush with the power of the purse, its members party like frat boys with booze and car keys. You might think that's just a Democratic problem, but the numbers say otherwise. When it comes to spending, the Republican Party has become the Toga Party.

Fiscal conservatives have no choice but to throw up their hands in disgust. If we want some sort of restraint in the federal budget, the best we can hope for is divided government. Give the presidency to one party, let the other one have Congress. With any luck, they'll be too busy fighting one another to spend our national wealth into oblivion.

We brings me to our final question. Which of the following political parties is committed to fiscal conservatism, halting runaway spending and reforming entitlements: Democrats or Republicans?

You're right, it's a trick question. The answer, at least so far, is none of the above. And that stinks.

When it comes to America's future, we can't afford to play games.

Dr. Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.