

If Not You, Who?

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If Not You, Who?

As Americans witnessed this year, partisan bickering and deep ideological policy differences nearly shut down the federal government and forced the nation into default. Elements of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) were shuttered over the summer as the House of Representatives and the Senate failed to reauthorize the agency. As a result, thousands of FAA employees and construction workers laboring on airport projects were furloughed, and the federal government ceased collecting millions of dollars a day in taxes. Amazingly, Congress was unable to resolve this issue at the same time it was struggling to identify billions of dollars in cuts to federal programs.

Why, you might ask, is AIBS's public policy director talking about this particular episode of political dysfunction? Because I fear that when many of you—individuals dedicated to using logic and reason to explain the world—read accounts of this kind of political gamesmanship, you become frustrated and begin dreaming of a research project that will allow you to spend a prolonged period in a remote location with limited access to the news. Although this sentiment is understandable, now is the wrong time for this response.

Although my FAA example illustrates the chaos and absurdity surrounding our current political environment, it is critical to note that President Obama and a majority in Congress do agree that the nation must reduce its deficit and that cuts to federal spending are required to achieve this goal. The arguments arise over how much should be cut, from what programs the cuts should come, and whether or how to address tax and entitlement reform. The impasse on those issues makes the risk of deep cuts to discretionary programs, such as scientific research, more likely and potentially damaging.

Under the terms of the debt ceiling and deficit reduction plan signed into law by the president last August, strict budget caps now limit federal spending on discretionary and defense programs. Therefore, there is little room to fund new programs or to restore funding that was cut earlier this year to agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency. The budget caps make it likely that new funding for one program will come at the expense of another. This environment becomes more treacherous if the bipartisan, bicameral congressional supercommittee charged with identifying \$1.2 trillion or more in additional cuts, savings from entitlement programs, or new revenue does not produce a plan that is signed into law this year. If this fails to happen, automatic cuts to discretionary and security programs begin.

Now, more than ever, it is important that scientists communicate the importance of federal investments in research and education to lawmakers. You must remind them that research drives innovation and new markets, creates jobs, and saves the government and industry money by providing the information needed to make informed decisions. These are messages that AIBS routinely shares with lawmakers. Please visit us at www.aibs.org/public-policy to learn more about what we are doing and how you can work with us to promote science to policymakers.

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