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Editorial: *D.C. Deceit/Budget Blueprint Is Awful*

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In Washington, D.C., there is never any shortage of hypocrisy, mischief and pure bunk masquerading as statesmanship. But perhaps no one piece of legislation in the 109th Congress will wrap all three into such a neat and offensive package as the fiscal 2006 budget blueprint that Congress' GOP leaders have been preparing for votes in the House and Senate this week.

In saner times, the budget resolution was a bipartisan document that expressed Congress' annual priorities for the nation. But in the mendacious and nasty mood that governs Capitol Hill this year, the budget resolution has turned into something quite the opposite. Consider: The concept of a budget resolution was invented in the early 1990s, a time of raging federal deficits, to force lawmakers to bring the federal budget back into balance. It worked for a decade. This year, however, House and Senate leaders have done the reverse. Following the lead of President Bush, they have drafted budget resolutions that would actually make budget deficits bigger in the next five years than they would be under current law.

The budget resolution also was designed to bring discipline to individual votes so that lawmakers couldn't enact a new tax cut or create a big new federal program without demonstrating how they would pay for it.

This year's draft turns the concept inside out: It would make it harder for Congress to increase federal spending but easier to pass new tax cuts that will add hundreds of billions of dollars to federal borrowing.

Quite apart from these procedural insults, the budget resolution that was taking shape early this week expressed indefensible priorities for the nation. It would deny health insurance to thousands of poor children, scale back crucial nutrition programs and eliminate child-care subsidies to hundreds of thousands of working-poor families -- this at a time when the nation's poverty rate is rising -- all while expanding tax cuts for the nation's wealthiest citizens, many of whom never sought the tax cuts in the first place. A handful of Senate moderates, including Republican Norm Coleman of Minnesota, expressed principled objections to these maneuvers when the Senate produced its version of the budget resolution a few weeks ago. They should let their party's leaders know that they will not accept more of the same from House-Senate conferees.

One other feature of this appalling process is worth special mention -- using the budget-making machinery to quietly authorize oil wells in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. In poll after poll, majorities of Americans have opposed drilling in this pristine wilderness. Until this year, so did a majority of senators. While the last election appears

to have provided a bare minimum of 51 votes for drilling, the Republicans still lack the 60 needed to block an inevitable filibuster.

So the budget resolution, which is filibuster-proof under Senate rules, was fitted with language assuming new revenue from oil-lease sales on refuge lands. Apparently that move wasn't sneaky enough -- this week, the Republican leaders were said to have deleted specific mention of the refuge and instead instructed the prodrilling House and Senate resource committees to do the dirty work during the even more obscure "reconciliation" phase of budgeting.

The secondary purpose of such subterfuge, of course, is to confer deniability -- enabling senators to tell their wilderness-minded constituents they were simply voting for a must-have federal budget, of which that Arctic business was but one small and regrettable part. The real message of this maneuver is that the Republicans, despite their firm control of both Congress and the White House, are pushing an agenda so unpopular that they feel compelled to mask its most outrageous elements with budgetary murk.