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Keynote Speakers: James A. Anderson, North Carolina State Univ. and George D. Kuh, National Survey of Student Engagement

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Cracker Federal deficit hits \$199 billion

By Alan Fram
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

This year's federal deficit will soar to \$199 billion even without President Bush's new tax cut plan or war against Iraq, the Congressional Budget Office said Wednesday in a report that cast doubt on chances for balancing the budget anytime soon.

The nonpartisan budget office projected that without action on any tax or spending initiatives — which no one considers realistic — small annual surpluses would not return until 2007, a year later than the office predicted in August.

In perhaps the starkest depiction of how rapidly the government's long-range outlook has eroded, the budget office said Wednesday that it envisioned a cumulative \$20 billion surplus over the decade that began last year. In May 2001, the office projected an unprecedented \$5.6 trillion surplus for that same period.

The bleak forecast further inflamed this year's budget fight between Bush and congressional Democrats, who accuse each other of speeding the downward spiral of the government's books. Bush wants more tax cuts and spending restraint, while Democrats prefer higher spending and smaller tax reductions.

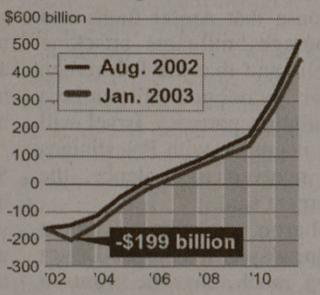
"The elephant in the room he didn't mention last night was the deficit," said Rep. John Spratt of South Carolina, top Democrat on the House Budget Committee, referring to the president's State of the Union address. "The question he avoided was: How would he do all the things he's talking about in the State of the Union and have any kind of bottom line left in the budget?"

In his speech, Bush renewed his call for a \$674 billion, 10-year tax-cutting plan to fortify the economy, and proposed spending initiatives including a \$400 billion, 10-year expansion of Medicare. He said the best way to control deficits is to fos-

Deeper in the red

President Bush's proposed budget deficit is \$54 billion larger than he previously proposed five months ago. Some private economists project that a war with Iraq could push the deficit to a record \$300 billion. The worst deficit was \$290 billion in 1992, the year after the last war with Iraq.

Annual budget



NOTE: 2002 figure is actual, all others are projected.

SOURCE: Congressional Budget Office AP

ter economic growth and limit federal spending.

Republicans echoed his argument Wednesday. They added that for now, deficits would have

to play second fiddle to initiatives aimed at invigorating the economy and confronting terrorism.

"If the only index you look at is cash flow, you may be missing the point" that there are other important priorities, said House Budget Committee Chairman Jim Nussle, R-Iowa.

The budget office's projected \$199 billion deficit for this year compared with a \$145 billion shortfall it projected in August. Its forecast five months ago for a \$111 billion deficit in 2004 also got worse, rising to \$145 billion in the new report.

Since CBO's projections include none of the tax and spending initiatives that lawmakers are likely to tackle, they are meant as a benchmark for measuring future action.

As a result, actual shortfalls are almost certain to be worse. Private economists have said this year's deficit will likely exceed \$300 billion — surpassing the record \$290 billion shortfall of 1992, when Bush's father was president.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Smugglers hold illegal immigrants hostage

PHOENIX (AP) — More than 60 illegal immigrants were held hostage in a Phoenix house while smugglers demanded payment from their families, police said Wednesday.

Police said a man who was allegedly being held at the house escaped Tuesday afternoon and called 911. Investigators found four alleged smugglers in the home, Detective

Tony Morales said. One was booked on suspicion of sexually assaulting a woman held at the house. The rest of the alleged smugglers and immigrants were turned over to immigration authorities.

Veterans Affairs: service will ail if U.S. heads to Iraq

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Veterans Affairs health care system doesn't have enough

money, has trouble recruiting doctors and nurses, makes some veterans wait months for an appointment and cuts others off from enrolling. A war with Iraq could only make the problems worse, lawmakers and officials said Wednesday.

Robert Roswell, the Department's undersecretary for health, said that while, overall, the VA health care system remains one of the most effective in the nation, the growth of demands on its services is "unsustainable."

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