



The Debt Limit: History and Recent Increases

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Summary

Total debt of the federal government can increase in two ways. First, debt increases when the government sells debt to the public to finance budget deficits and acquire the financial resources needed to meet its obligations. This increases *debt held by the public*. Second, debt increases when the federal government issues debt to certain government accounts, such as the Social Security, Medicare, and Transportation trust funds, in exchange for their reported surpluses. This increases *debt held by government accounts*. The sum of *debt held by the public* and *debt held by government accounts* is the total federal debt. Surpluses generally reduce debt held by the public, while deficits raise it. On November 2, 2010, total federal debt outstanding was \$13,724 billion. Some project that federal debt will near its statutory limit in early spring 2011, although tax policy and spending changes, as well as economic trends, could affect that timing.

A statutory limit has restricted total federal debt since 1917 when Congress passed the Second Liberty Bond Act. Congress has voted to raise the debt limit ten times since 2001. Deficits each year since 2001 and the persistent increases in debt held by government accounts repeatedly raised the debt to or near the limit in place at the time. Congress raised the limit in June 2002, and by December 2002 the U.S. Department of the Treasury asked Congress for another increase, which was passed in May 2003. In June 2004, the Treasury asked for another debt limit increase. After Congress recessed in mid-October 2004 without acting, the Secretary of the Treasury told Congress that the actions he was taking to avoid exceeding the debt limit would suffice only through mid-November. Congress approved a debt limit increase in a post-election session, which the President signed on November 19, 2004. In 2005, reconciliation instructions in the FY2006 budget resolution (H.Con.Res. 95) included a debt limit increase. With no action having been taken by December 2005, the Secretary of the Treasury sent several letters warning Congress that the Treasury would exhaust its options to avoid default by mid-March 2006. Congress passed an increase in mid-March, which the President signed on March 20. The House indirectly approved legislation (H.J.Res. 43) to raise the debt limit by \$850 billion to \$9,815 billion. The Senate approved the resolution on September 27, 2007, and it was signed by the President two days later.

The current economic slowdown led to sharply higher deficits in FY2008 and FY2009, which led to a series of debt limit increases. The Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 (H.R. 3221), signed into law (P.L. 110-289) on July 30, 2008, included a debt limit increase. The Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (H.R. 1424), signed into law on October 3 (P.L. 110-343), raised the debt limit again. The debt limit was increased for the third time in less than a year with the passage of American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 on February 13, 2009 (ARRA; H.R. 1), which was signed into law on February 17, 2009 (P.L. 111-5), which raised the debt limit to \$12,104 billion.

The House's adoption of the conference report on the FY2010 budget resolution (S.Con.Res. 13) on April 29, 2009, triggered the automatic passage of H.J.Res. 45 to raise the debt limit to \$13,029 billion. In August 2009, Treasury reportedly said that the debt limit would be reached in mid-October, although it later stated that the limit would not be reached until December 2009. H.R. 4314, passed by the House on December 16, 2009, and by the Senate on December 24, raised the debt limit to \$12,394 billion when the President signed the measure (P.L. 111-123) on December 28. On January 28, the Senate passed an amended version of H.J.Res. 45, which the House passed on February 4 and the President signed on February 12 (P.L. 111-139), raising the limit to \$14,294 billion. This report, written with the assistance of Joseph McCormack, will be updated as events warrant.

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Introduction

The statutory debt limit applies to almost all federal debt.¹ The limit applies to federal debt held by the public (that is, debt held outside the federal government itself) and to federal debt held by the government's own accounts. Federal trust funds, such as Social Security, Medicare, Transportation, and Civil Service Retirement accounts, hold most of this internally held debt.² The government's surpluses or deficits determine essentially all of the change in debt held by the public.³ The government's on-budget fiscal balance, which excludes a small U.S. Postal Service net surplus or deficit and a large Social Security surplus of payroll taxes net of paid benefits, does not directly affect debt held in government accounts.⁴ Increases or decreases in debt held by government accounts result from net financial flows into accounts holding the debt, such as the Social Security Trust Fund. Legal requirements and government accounting practices also affect levels of debt held by government accounts.⁵

On November 2, 2010, total federal debt outstanding was \$13,724 billion, and debt subject to the debt limit was \$13,673 billion, about \$620 billion below the current statutory debt limit of \$14,294 billion.⁶ In August 2010, the Congressional Budget Office estimated that the FY2011 budget deficit will total \$1,066 billion, which suggests that federal debt will reach its limit some time in calendar 2011, unless spending or revenue policies are altered or the debt limit is again raised.⁷ Some Wall Street analysts expect federal debt to near its limit in early April 2011, although many factors, including federal tax policy and strength of the economic recovery, could affect federal debt trends.

The Debt Limit and the Treasury

Standard methods of financing federal activities or meeting government obligations used by the U.S. Department of Treasury (Treasury) can be hobbled when federal debt nears its legal limit. If the limit prevents the Treasury from issuing new debt to manage short-term cash flows or to finance an annual deficit, the government may be unable to obtain the cash needed to pay its bills or it may be unable to invest the surpluses of designated government accounts (federal trust

¹ Approximately 0.5% of total debt is excluded from debt limit coverage. As of December 29, 2009, total public debt outstanding was \$12,100 billion; debt subject to limit was \$12,045 billion or 99.5% of total public debt outstanding. The Treasury defines "Total Public Debt Subject to Limit" as "the Total Public Debt Outstanding less Unamortized Discount on Treasury Bills and Zero-Coupon Treasury Bonds, old debt issued prior to 1917, and old currency called United States Notes, as well as Debt held by the Federal Financing Bank and Guaranteed Debt." For details, see <http://www.treasurydirect.gov>.

² Although there are hundreds of trust funds, the overwhelming majority are very small. The 12 largest trust funds hold 98.8% of the federal debt held in government accounts.

³ Other means of financing—including cash balance changes, seigniorage, and capitalization of financing accounts used to fund federal credit programs—have relatively little effect on the changes in debt held by the public.

⁴ In future years, when some trust funds are projected to pay out more than they take in, funds that the Treasury would use to redeem those intergovernmental debts must be obtained via higher taxes or lower government spending.

⁵ Trust fund surpluses by law must be invested in special federal government securities.

⁶ Daily data on federal debt can be obtained at the Treasury Department's Bureau of the Public Debt website: <http://www.treasurydirect.gov/NP/BPDLogin?application=np>. Data on debt subject to limit are provided in the *Daily Treasury Statement*, available at <http://fms.treas.gov/dts/index.html>.

⁷ U.S. Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: An Update*, August 19, 2010, p. 1, available at <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=11705>.

funds) in federal debt as generally required by law. In either case, the Treasury is left in a bind; the law requires that the government's legal obligations be paid, but the debt limit may prevent it from issuing the debt that would allow it to do so.

The government's income and outlays vary over the course of the year, producing monthly surpluses and deficits that affect the level of debt, whether or not the government has a surplus or deficit for the entire year. The government accounts holding federal debt also can experience monthly deficits and surpluses, even if most of them currently show annual surpluses.

Past Treasury Secretaries, when faced with a nearly binding debt ceiling, have used special strategies to handle cash and debt management responsibilities. Actions taken in the past include suspending sales of nonmarketable debt, postponing or downsizing marketable debt auctions, and withholding receipts that would be transferred to certain government trust funds. Congress has authorized the Treasury Secretary to use some of these strategies using the Civil Service Retirement Fund and the Thrift Savings Fund, along with the authority to make those funds whole after an easing of the debt constraint.⁸ Some U.S. Treasury responses to the credit crunch that began in mid 2007 created balance sheet items that might expand options available to the Treasury Secretary. The Treasury Secretary, however, is unlikely to maintain smooth debt management operations indefinitely in the face of a continuing fiscal imbalance between federal revenues and outlays without an increase in the debt limit.

Why Have a Debt Limit?

The debt limit can hinder the Treasury's ability to manage the federal government's finances, as noted above. In extreme cases, when the federal debt is very near its statutory limit, the Treasury must take unusual and extraordinary measures to meet federal obligations.⁹ While the debt limit has never caused the federal government to default on its obligations, it has at times caused great inconvenience and has added uncertainty to Treasury operations.

The debt limit also provides Congress with the strings to control the federal purse, allowing Congress to assert its constitutional prerogatives to control spending.¹⁰ The debt limit also imposes a form of fiscal accountability that compels Congress and the President to take visible action to allow further federal borrowing when the federal government spends more than it collects in revenues. In the words of one author, the debt limit "expresses a national devotion to the idea of thrift and to economical management of the fiscal affairs of the government."¹¹ On the other hand, some budget experts have advocated elimination of the debt limit, arguing that other controls provided by the modern congressional budget process established in 1974 have superseded the debt limit, and that the limit does little to alter spending and revenue policies that determine the size of the federal deficit.¹²

⁸ For details, see archived CRS Report 95-1109, *Authority to Tap Trust Funds and Establish Payment Priorities if the Debt Limit is not Increased*, by Thomas J. Nicola and Morton Rosenberg. Available upon request from authors.

⁹ U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), *Analysis of Actions Taken during the 2003 Debt Issuance Suspension Period*, GAO-04-526, May 2004, available at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04526.pdf>.

¹⁰ For a vigorous assertion of the utility of the debt ceiling, see Anita S. Drishnakumar, "In Defense of the Debt Limit Statute," *Harvard Journal on Legislation*, vol. 42, 2005, pp. 135-185.

¹¹ Marshall A. Robinson, *The National Debt Ceiling: An Experiment in Fiscal Policy*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1959, p. 5.

¹² Bruce Bartlett, "Why Congress Must Now Abolish its Debt Limit," *Financial Times*, October 22, 2009, p. 11.

A Brief History of the Federal Debt Limit

Origins of the Federal Debt Limit

The statutory limit on federal debt began with the Second Liberty Bond Act of 1917,¹³ which helped finance the United States' entry into World War I.¹⁴ By allowing the Treasury to issue long-term Liberty Bonds, which were marketed to the public at large, the federal government held down its interest costs.¹⁵

Before World War I, Congress authorized specific loans, such as the Panama Canal loan, or allowed the Treasury to issue specific types of debt instruments, such as certificates of indebtedness, bills, notes and bonds.¹⁶ In other cases, Congress provided the Treasury with limited discretion to choose debt instruments.¹⁷ With the passage of the Second Liberty Bond Act, Congress enacted aggregate constraints on certificates of indebtedness and on bonds that allowed the Treasury greater ability to respond to changing conditions and more flexibility in financial management. Debt limit legislation in the following two decades also set separate limits for different categories of debt, such as bills, certificates, and bonds.

In 1939, Congress eliminated separate limits on bonds and on other types of debt, which created the first aggregate limit that covered nearly all public debt.¹⁸ This measure gave the Treasury freer rein to manage the federal debt as it saw fit. Thus, the Treasury could issue debt instruments with maturities that would reduce interest costs and minimize financial risks stemming from future interest rate changes.¹⁹ On the other hand, although the Treasury was delegated greater independence of action, the debt limit on the eve of World War II was much closer to total federal debt than it had been at the end of World War I. For example, the 1919 Victory Liberty Bond Act (P.L. 65-328) raised the maximum allowable federal debt to \$43 billion, far above the \$25.5 billion in total federal debt at the end of FY1919.²⁰ By contrast, the debt limit in 1939 was \$45 billion, only about 10% above the \$40.4 billion total federal debt of that time.

¹³ P.L. 65-43, 40 Stat. 288, enacted September 24, 1917. Currently codified as amended as 31 U.S.C. § 3101.

¹⁴ H. J. Cooke and M. Katzen, "The Public Debt Limit," *Journal of Finance*, vol. 9, no. 3 (September 1954), pp. 298-303.

¹⁵ Robert D. Hormats, *The Price of Liberty*, (New York: Henry Holt, 2007), ch. 4.

¹⁶ Treasury certificates of indebtedness were short-term, interest-bearing securities. Treasury bills are securities with a maturity of a year or less. Treasury notes are interest-bearing securities that generally have maturities of two to five years. Treasury bonds are interest-bearing securities that generally have maturities of 10 or more years.

¹⁷ Marshall A. Robinson, *The National Debt Ceiling: An Experiment in Fiscal Policy*, (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1959), pp.1-6.

¹⁸ P.L. 76-201. Some authors claimed the aggregate limit was first created in Public Debt Act of 1941 (P.L. 77-7). The 1939 Senate floor debate, however, makes clear that Congress intended to lift categorical debt restrictions. See Senate debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 84, part 6 (June 1, 1939), pp. 6480, 6497-6501.

¹⁹ This limit did not apply to certain previous public debt issues that constituted a minor portion of the federal debt.

²⁰ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1970*, H. Doc. 93-78 (Washington: GPO, 1975), Series Y 493-504.

World War II and After

The debt ceiling was raised to accommodate accumulating costs for World War II in each year from 1941 through 1945, when it was set at \$300 billion.²¹ After World War II ended, the debt limit was reduced to \$275 billion. Because the Korean War was mostly financed by higher taxes rather than by increased debt, the limit remained at \$275 billion until 1954. After 1954, the debt limit was reduced twice and increased seven times, until March 1962 when it again reached \$300 billion, its level at the end of World War II. Since March 1962, Congress has enacted 74 separate measures that have altered the limit on federal debt.²² Most of these changes in the debt limit were, measured in percentage terms, small in comparison to changes adopted in wartime or during the Great Depression. Some recent increases in the debt limit, however, were large in dollar terms. For instance, in May 2003, the debt limit increased by \$984 billion.

The Debt Ceiling in the Last Decade

During the four years (FY1998-FY2001) the government ran surpluses, federal debt held by intergovernmental accounts grew by \$855 billion and debt held by the public fell by almost \$450 billion. Since FY2001, however, debt held by the public has grown due to persistent and substantial budget deficits. Debt held in government accounts also has grown, in large part because Social Security payroll taxes have exceeded payments of beneficiaries. **Table 1** shows components of debt in current dollars and as percentages of gross domestic product (GDP).²³

Table 1. Components of Debt Subject to Limit, FY1996-FY2010
(in billions of current dollars and as percentage of GDP)

End of Fiscal Year	Debt Limit	Debt Subject to Limit					
		Total		Held by Government Accounts		Held by the Public	
		\$ Billion	% of GDP	\$ Billion	% of GDP	\$ Billion	% of GDP
1996	\$5,500	\$5,137.2	65.7%	1,432.4	18.3%	3,704.8	47.4%
1997	5,950	5,327.6	64.2	1,581.9	19.0	3,745.8	45.1
1998	5,950	5,439.4	62.2	1,742.1	19.9	3,697.4	42.3
1999	5,950	5,567.7	60.1	1,958.2	21.1	3,609.5	38.9
2000	5,950	5,591.6	57.0	2,203.9	22.4	3,387.7	34.5
2001	5,950	5,732.8	56.6	2,436.5	24.1	3,296.3	32.5
2002	6,400	6,161.4	58.9	2,644.2	25.3	3,517.2	33.6
2003	7,384	6,737.6	61.4	2,846.7	25.9	3,890.8	35.5

²¹ Public Debt Acts of 1941 (P.L. 77-7), 1942 (P.L. 77-510), 1943 (78-34), 1944 (P.L. 78-333), and 1945 (P.L. 79-48).

²² U.S. Office of Management and Budget, *FY2010 Budget of the U.S. Government: Historical Tables*, Table 7-3.

²³ Until 2001, Treasury publications did not divide debt subject to limit by that held by the public and that held by government accounts. **Table 1** uses CRS calculations that approximate levels of debt subject to limit held in these two categories for fiscal years prior to 2001.

2004	7,384	7,333.4	62.5	3,056.6	26.0	4,276.8	36.4
2005	8,184	7,871.0	64.0	3,301.0	26.9	4,570.1	37.2
2006	8,965	8,420.3	64.2	3,610.4	27.5	4,809.8	36.7
2007	9,815 ^a	8,921.3	65.4	3,903.7	28.6	5,017.6	36.8
2008	10,615 ^b	9,960.0	70.0	4,180.0	29.4	5,780.3	40.6
2009	12,104 ^c	11,909.8	84.1	4,358.0	30.8	7,551.9	53.3
2010	14,294 ^d	13,384.5 ^e	88.4 ^e	4,502.1 ^e	29.7 ^e	8,933.3 ^e	59.0 ^e
Change during FY1998 - FY2001		\$405.2		\$854.6		\$-449.5	
Change during FY2002 - FY2009		\$5,748.4		\$1,713.8		\$4,034.7	

Source: U.S. Department of the Treasury, Financial Management Service, *Treasury Bulletin*, June 2001 and December 2006. Bureau of the Public Debt, *Monthly Statement of Public Debt*, various issues. CRS calculations.

Notes: For the fiscal years 1996 through 2000, the amounts held by government accounts and held by the public are approximations. In 2001, the Treasury publications began distinguishing holders of debt subject to limit. The numbers in the table showing this breakdown for FY1996 through FY2000 were calculated by subtracting debts of the Federal Financing Bank, an arm of the Treasury whose debt is not subject to limit, from total debt held by government accounts. This calculation approximates the amount of that debt subject to limit. This approximation overestimates debt by billions of dollars because estimates of unamortized discount are unavailable. This adjusted amount was then subtracted from total debt subject to limit to produce an approximate measure of debt held by the public subject to limit. Because the amount held by government accounts is overestimated, the resulting measure of debt held by the public subject to limit is underestimated. Totals may not sum due to rounding.

- a. Debt limit increased September 29, 2007, to \$9,815 billion.
- b. The debt limit was increased twice in 2008—to \$10,615 billion on July 30 and then to \$11,315 billion on October 3, at the start of FY2009.
- c. Debt limit was increased February 17, 2009, to \$12,104 billion.
- d. Debt limit was increased February 12, 2010, to \$14,294 billion.
- e. As of September 3, 2010. FY2010 ends on September 30, 2010.

Figure 1 shows the components of federal debt as shares of gross domestic product (GDP) from FY1940 through FY2009.²⁴ Federal debt held by government accounts has grown steadily since 1980. Debt held by the public, which changes in response to total surpluses or deficits, grew as a share of GDP through the mid-1990s. After FY1992, deficits shrank, and from FY1998 through FY2001 the federal government ran surpluses.²⁵ Those surpluses, along with rapid GDP growth, reduced debt held by the public as a percentage of GDP. When large deficits returned and GDP growth slowed in the early 2000s, debt held by the public as a share of GDP again increased. Smaller deficits in FY2006 and FY2007 led to smaller increases in publicly held debt. The total FY2007 deficit fell to 1.2% of GDP according to CBO.²⁶ Financial turmoil in 2007 and 2008 and

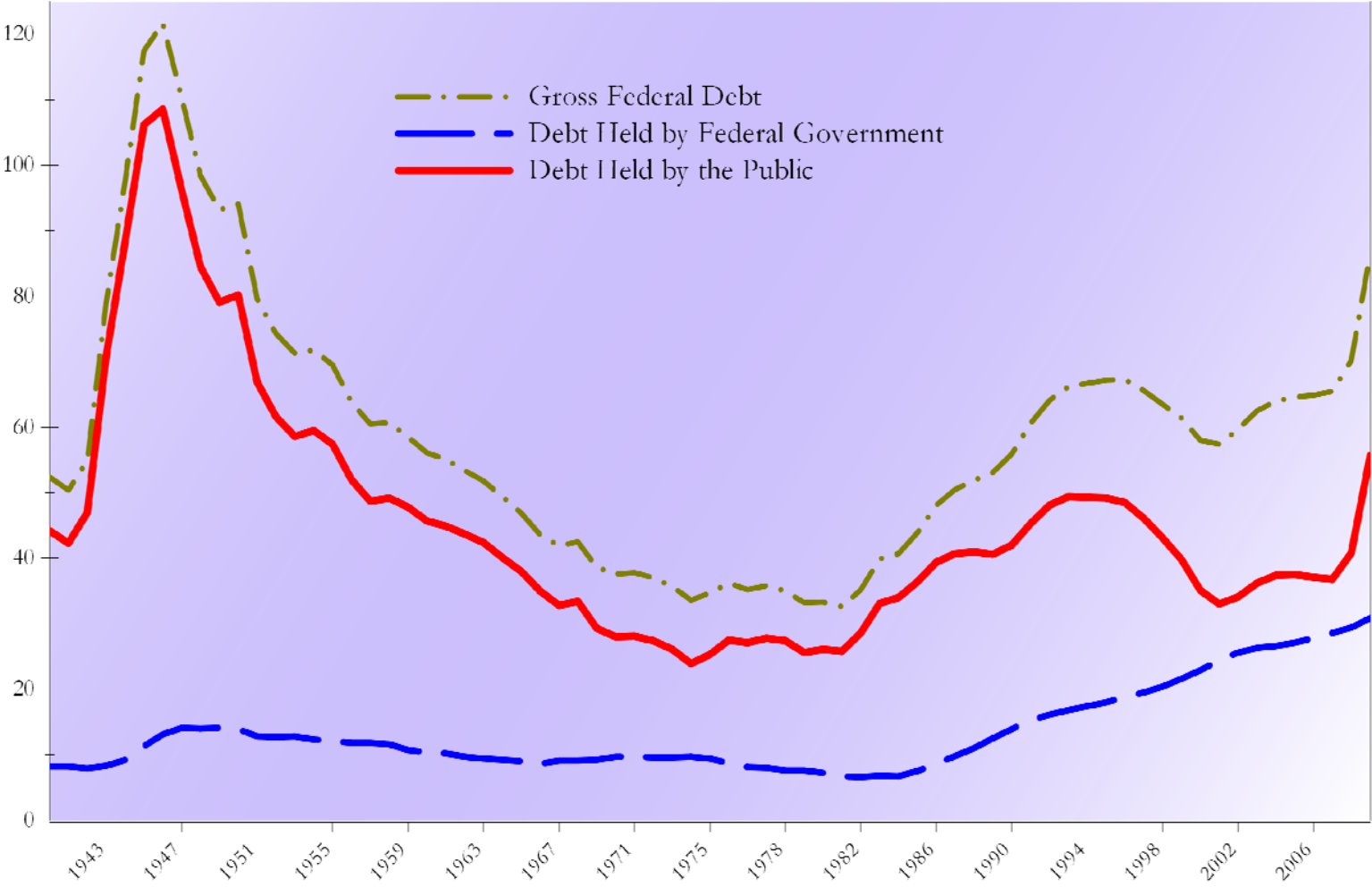
²⁴ The data show components of debt compared to the size of the economy. This avoids possible distortions resulting from changing price levels over time and includes changes in per capita incomes. This percentage increases when debt grows faster than GDP and falls when it grows more slowly than GDP.

²⁵ Federal on-budget receipts and outlays nearly matched in FY1999, and the on-budget surplus in FY2000 was 0.9% of GDP. Prior to FY1999, the federal government last had an on-budget surplus in FY1960. Social Security receipts in excess of benefits make up most of the off-budget surplus, which has been positive since FY1985.

²⁶ U.S. Congress, Congressional Budget Office, *An Analysis of the President's Budgetary Proposals for Fiscal Year 2009*, March 2008, available at <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/89xx/doc8990/03-19-AnalPresBudget.pdf>.

a subsequent recession that began in late 2007 led to federal actions taken to stabilize the housing and financial markets. The recession reduced federal revenues and increased federal spending, leading to large deficits and a series of debt limit increases.

Figure I. Components of Federal Debt As a Percentage of GDP, FY1940-FY2009



Source: OMB, Budget of the United States for FY2010, Historical Tables, February 2009; Mid-Session Review, August 2009.

The Debt Limit Issue in 2002

Accumulating debt in government accounts produced most of the pressure on the debt limit that occurred early in 2002. As deficits reemerged in FY2002, increases in debt held by the public added to the pressure on the debt limit in the spring of 2002. During the four fiscal years with surpluses (FY1998-FY2001), the increases in federally held debt and decreases in debt held by the public produced a net increase of \$405 billion in total debt subject to limit. At the beginning of FY2002 (October 1, 2001), debt subject to limit was within \$217 billion of the existing \$5,950 billion debt limit.²⁷ Between then and the end of May 2002, debt subject to limit increased by another \$217 billion, divided between a \$117 billion increase in debt held by government accounts and a \$100 billion increase in debt held by the public, putting the debt close to the \$5,950 billion limit. **Table A-1**, presented in the **Appendix**, shows month-by-month debt totals and accumulations from September 2001 through August 2010.

In the fall of 2001, the Administration recognized that a deteriorating budget outlook and continued growth in debt held by government accounts were likely to lead to the debt limit soon being reached. In early December 2001, it asked Congress to raise the debt limit by \$750 billion to \$6,700 billion. As the debt moved closer to and reached the debt limit over the first six months of FY2002, the Administration asked Congress repeatedly to increase the debt limit, warning of adverse financial consequences were the limit not raised.

On April 4, 2002, the Treasury held debt below the limit by invoking its legislatively mandated authority to suspend reinvestment of government securities in the G-Fund of the federal employees' Thrift Savings Plan (TSP). This allowed the Treasury to issue new debt and meet the government's obligations. On April 15, debt subject to limit stood at \$5,949,975 million, just \$25 million below the limit. Once April 15 tax revenues flowed in, the Treasury "made whole" the G-Fund by restoring all of the debt that had not been issued to the TSP over this period and crediting the fund with interest it would have earned on that debt.²⁸ By the end of April, debt subject to limit had fallen back \$35 billion below the limit.

Resolving the Debt Limit Issue in 2002

By the middle of May 2002, debt subject to limit had again risen to within \$15 million of the statutory limit. At the FY2002 average spending rate, \$15 million equaled about five minutes of federal outlays. The Treasury, for the second time in 2002, used its statutory authority to avoid a default. The Treasury's financing problems, however, would persist without an increase in the debt limit. On May 14, the Treasury asked Congress to raise the debt limit or enact other statutory changes allowing the Treasury to issue new debt. A Treasury news release stated "absent extraordinary actions, the government will exceed the statutory debt ceiling no later than May 16," and that

²⁷ The debt limit was raised from \$5,500 billion to \$5,950 billion on August 5, 1997, as part of the Balanced Budget Act of 1997 (P.L. 105-33, 111 Stat. 251).

²⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of the Treasury's previous uses of its short-term ability to avoid breaching the debt limit, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Debt Ceiling: Analysis of Actions During the 1995-1996 Crisis*, GAO/AIMD-96-130, August 1996.

a “debt issuance suspension period” will begin no later than May 16 [2002].... [This] allows the Treasury to suspend or redeem investments in two trust funds, which will provide flexibility to fund the operations of the government during this period.²⁹

The Treasury reduced federal debt held by these government accounts by replacing it with non-interest-bearing, non-debt instruments, which enabled it to issue new debt to meet the government’s obligations. The Treasury claimed these extraordinary actions would suffice, at the latest, through June 28, 2002. Without a debt limit increase by that date, the Treasury indicated it would need to take other actions to avoid breaching the ceiling. By June 21, the Treasury had postponed a regular securities auction, but took no other actions. With large payments and other obligations due at the end of June and at the beginning of July, the Treasury stated it would soon exhaust all options to issue debt and fulfill government obligations, putting the government on the verge of a default.

During May and June 2002, Congress took steps to increase the debt limit. The FY2002 supplemental appropriations bill (H.R. 4775) passed by the House on May 24 included, after extended debate, language allowing any eventual House-Senate conference on the legislation to increase the debt limit. However, the Senate’s supplemental appropriations bill (S. 2551; incorporated as an amendment to H.R. 4775, June 3, 2002) omitted debt-limit-increasing language. The Senate leadership expressed strong reluctance to include a debt limit increase in the supplemental appropriation bill. Instead, on June 11, the Senate adopted a bill (S. 2578), without debate, to raise the debt limit by \$450 billion to \$6,400 billion. At that time, a \$450 billion debt limit increase was thought to provide enough borrowing authority for government operations through the rest of calendar year 2002, if not through the summer of 2003. With the possibility of default looming over it, the House passed the \$450 billion debt limit increase by a single vote on June 27. The President signed the bill into law on June 28 (P.L. 107-199, 116 Stat. 734), ending the 2002 debt limit crisis.³⁰

The Debt Limit Issue in 2003

On Christmas Eve, 2002, Kenneth Dam, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury sent a letter to Congress requesting an unspecified increase in the debt limit by late February 2003, signaling that the \$6,400 billion debt limit would then be reached.³¹ The 108th Congress, still in the process of organizing itself, did not immediately respond. Through the winter and into the spring, the Treasury repeatedly requested that the debt limit be raised to avoid serious financial problems. By February 20, 2003, the Treasury, as in 2002, used legislatively mandated measures to manage debt holdings of certain government accounts to avoid reaching the debt limit. These actions included the replacement of internally held government debt with non-debt instruments in certain government accounts and not issuing new debt to these accounts. These actions allowed the Treasury to issue additional debt to the public to acquire the cash needed to pay for the government’s commitments or to issue new debt to other federal accounts.

²⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Treasury News, *Treasury Statement on the Debt Ceiling*, May 14, 2002.

³⁰ For additional details, see U.S. General Accounting Office, *Debt Ceiling: Analysis of Actions During the 2002 Debt Issuance Suspension Period*, GAO-03-134, December 2002.

³¹ Kenneth Dam, Deputy Secretary of the Treasury, letter to Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, December 24, 2002, available at <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/po3718.htm>.

Through the rest of February and into May, the Treasury held debt subject to limit \$15 million below the debt ceiling.³² The adoption of the conference report on the FY2004 budget resolution (H.Con.Res. 95; H.Rept. 108-71) on April 11, 2003, in the House triggered the “Gephardt rule” (House Rule XXVII) that deems to have passed legislation (in this case, H.J.Res. 51) raising the debt limit to accommodate the spending and revenue levels approved in the adopted budget resolution.³³

The Senate received the debt-limit legislation on April 11, but did not act until May 23, after receiving further Treasury warnings of imminent default. On that day, debt subject to limit was \$25 million (or 0.0004%) below the existing \$6,400 billion limit. The Senate adopted the legislation, after rejecting eight amendments and sent it to the President, who signed it on May 27. This legislation raised the debt limit to \$7,384 billion (P.L. 108-24, 117 Stat. 710).

The Debt Limit Issue in 2004

In January 2004, CBO estimated that the debt limit, then set at \$7,384 billion, would be reached the following summer.³⁴ In June 2004, the Treasury asked Congress to raise the debt limit in order to avoid the disruptions to government finances experienced in the previous two years.³⁵ In August, and again in September, the Treasury declared that the debt limit would be reached in the first half of October. On October 14, debt subject to limit reached \$7,383,975 million, just \$25 million below the existing limit. The Treasury employed methods used in the previous two years to keep debt under the legal limit. On October 14, Secretary of the Treasury John Snow informed Congress, just before the election recess, that available measures to avoid breaching the debt limit would be exhausted by mid-November.³⁶ Without an increase in the debt limit, the Treasury would be unable to meet all of the government’s existing obligations, and the government could default.³⁷

Although the House passed a budget resolution for FY2005 in the spring of 2004, it did not reach final agreement with the Senate on the measure. Without a budget resolution passed by Congress, no resolution to raise the debt limit could be deemed passed by the House automatically under the Gephardt rule. Consequently, no measure was available to send to the Senate. As the debt approached the limit through the summer and into the fall, no legislation was moved to raise the debt limit.

³² The Treasury reduced the amount of debt held by selected federal accounts while it sold an equal (or smaller) amount of debt to the public. This raised cash needed to pay for ongoing obligations and kept the debt below the limit.

³³ The House Budget Committee has some discretion in setting the debt limit level in the House Joint resolution generated by the Gephardt rule. See CRS Report 98-453, *Debt-Limit Legislation in the Congressional Budget Process*, by Bill Heniff Jr. and CRS Report RL31913, *Developing Debt-Limit Legislation: The House’s “Gephardt Rule”*, by Bill Heniff Jr..

³⁴ U.S. Congress, Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: Fiscal Years 2005 to 2014*, January 2004.

³⁵ Alan Fram, “Congress May Duck Debt Limit Raise,” *Oakland Tribune*, June 5, 2004.

³⁶ John W. Snow, Secretary of the U.S. Treasury, letter to Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, October 14, 2004, available at <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/reports/frist.pdf>.

³⁷ Although not all the possible consequences of a government default are known, it would mean that the government could no longer meet all of its legal obligations. Not only the default, but the efforts to resolve it would arguably have negative repercussions on both domestic and international financial markets and economies.

Earlier, in September 2004, the House had added an amendment to the FY2005 Transportation-Treasury appropriations (H.R. 5025) in an effort to remove the Treasury's flexibility in financing the government as federal debt approached and reached the existing limit. Without that flexibility, the government would be unable to meet its financial obligations as the amount of debt neared the limit. The legislation cleared the House, but the Senate did not act on it.

After the elections, Senator Frist, on November 16, 2004, introduced legislation (S. 2986) to raise the debt limit by \$800 billion, from \$7,384 billion to \$8,184 billion. The Senate approved the increase on November 17, 2004. The House considered and approved the increase on November 18. The President signed the legislation into law (P.L. 108-415, 118 Stat. 2337) on November 19, 2004. Estimates made at that time anticipated the new limit would be reached between August and December 2005.

Shortly before the increase in the debt limit, the Treasury delayed a debt auction and informed Congress that it would invoke a "debt limit suspension period" as it had in previous years. The increase in the debt limit in mid-November allowed the Treasury to reschedule the debt auction and cancel, before it began, the "debt limit suspension period."

The Debt Limit Issue in 2005, 2006, and 2007

Debt limit increases in 2005, 2006, and 2007 took a less dramatic path than those in President Bush's first term. In 2005, Congress included three reconciliation instructions in the FY2006 budget resolution (H.Con.Res. 95, 109th Congress; April 28, 2005), the third of which directed the House Committee on Ways and Means and the Senate Finance Committee to report bills raising the debt limit. The instructions specified a \$781 billion debt limit increase, to \$8,965 billion, with a reporting date of no later than September 30, 2005. Neither committee reported a bill to raise the debt limit.

The adoption of the conference report on the FY2006 budget resolution in late April 2005 also triggered the Gephardt rule (House Rule XXVII), producing a House Joint Resolution (H.J.Res. 47) that also would raise the debt limit by \$781 billion to \$8,965 billion. Under the rule, the resolution was automatically deemed passed by the House and sent to the Senate. Through the end of the first session of the 109th Congress, the Senate had not considered H.J.Res. 47, nor had Congress considered a reconciliation bill raising the debt limit as called for in the budget resolution.

At the end of December 2005, Secretary of the Treasury Snow wrote Congress that the debt limit would probably be reached in mid-February 2006, although the Treasury could take actions that maintain the debt below its limit until mid-March. He therefore requested an increase in the debt limit.³⁸ In two more letters, sent on February 19 and March 6, Secretary Snow advised Congress that the Treasury was taking measures within its legal discretion to avoid reaching the limit and that these measures would suffice only until the middle of March 2006. Secretary Snow authorized actions used previously by the Treasury, including declaring a debt issuance suspension period. As March began, the government was again close to becoming unable to meet its obligations. During the week of March 13 the Senate took up H.J.Res. 47. On March 16, the

³⁸ John W. Snow, Secretary of the Treasury, letter to Senator Max Baucus, December 29, 2005, available at http://www.ombwatch.org/budget/pdf/snow_debtlimit_2006.pdf.

Senate passed a debt limit increase after rejecting several amendments. The President's signature on March 20, 2006, then raised the debt limit (P.L. 109-182) to \$8,965 billion.

In mid-May 2007, Congress passed the conference report (H.Rept. 110-153) on the FY2008 budget resolution. The House's Gephardt rule, triggered by the adoption of the conference report on the budget resolution, resulted in the automatic engrossment of a joint resolution (in this case, H.J.Res. 43, 110th Congress) raising the debt limit by \$850 billion to \$9,815 billion, and sending it to the Senate. At the end of July 2007, the Treasury asked Congress to raise the debt limit, stating the limit would be reached in early October 2007. In August, the CBO Director said that projections suggested that the limit would be reached in late October or early November. Without an increase, the Treasury indicated that it would take steps within its legal authority to avoid exceeding the debt limit. The Senate Finance Committee approved the House resolution (H.J.Res. 43) without changes on September 12, 2007. The Senate then passed the measure on September 27, which the President signed on September 29, 2007 (P.L. 110-91).

The Economic Slowdown and Federal Debt

Fiscal Policy Considerations

The U.S. economy is currently recovering slowly from a severe economic recession that began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009.³⁹ The economic slowdown began with a rapid deceleration of housing prices and a rise in interest rate spreads between private lending rates and benchmark Federal Reserve rates, indicating an increasing reluctance of major financial institutions to lend to each other as well as to firms and individuals. This led to sharply higher federal deficit spending in FY2008 spurred by several major actions taken by Congress to unfreeze credit markets, boost consumption, and increase spending. Deficit spending was even higher in FY2009, with higher than average deficits as a percentage of GDP persisting into the next decade, likely leading to further increases in the federal debt and debt limit. While deficits for FY2010 were slightly lower and fiscal conditions are projected to improve in FY2011, deficits remain high relative to historical experience.

Economic recession affects the federal deficit in several ways. First, falling prices of many assets and equities can sharply reduce federal revenues from capital gains taxes and from the corporate tax. Second, individual income taxes, the largest component of federal revenues, may also fall if jobs are cut and unemployment increases due to economic conditions. Third, "automatic stabilizers" such as unemployment insurance and income support programs pay out more money as unemployment rises and the number of households eligible for means-tested benefits rises, thus increasing federal spending.

Boosting the economy through deficit spending provides a fiscal stimulus if the output levels of goods and services produced in the nation are below their potential levels. Deficit spending, however, can help accelerate inflation if output levels are near or at potential levels, and in addition, exacerbates long-term fiscal challenges. Several economists have expressed concerns that inflation, which had been relatively low since the early 1980s, could accelerate due to rising

³⁹ The end of a recession is said to occur when an economy has stopped shrinking, not when it has recovered. See National Bureau of Economic Research Business Cycle Dating Committee, press release, September 20, 2010, available at <http://www.nber.org/cycles/sept2010.html>.

prices of food, energy, and primary commodities. While inflation would reduce the market value of the federal deficit, it would require Treasury to pay higher nominal interest rates on federal debt. The U.S. economy, however, is currently operating well below its potential, which has kept inflation at lower levels.

Raising the Debt Ceiling in 2008, 2009, and 2010

In a March 2008 report, CBO estimated the President's budget would lead to a \$396 billion deficit in FY2008 and a \$342 billion deficit in FY2009.⁴⁰ The actual deficit for FY2008 reached \$455 billion. In August 2009, CBO estimated the deficit would total \$1,587 billion in FY2009 and \$1,381 billion in FY2010.⁴¹ As a result of the current economic conditions and the actions of the federal government to bring the economy out of recession, the federal debt limit was raised twice in the second half of 2008 and twice in 2009.

The House Concurrent Resolution on the Budget (H.Con.Res. 312) recommended policies that would result in a \$10,200 billion debt in FY2009. The Senate Concurrent Resolution on the Budget S.Con.Res. 70) recommended policies that would result in a total debt of \$10,278 billion in FY2009.⁴² Implementing either set of policies would require an increase in the federal debt limit. The conference agreement (H.Rept. 110-659) also recommended spending levels that would lead to a debt subject to limit of \$10,207 billion in FY2009, a level that would require an increase in the statutory debt limit. The budget conference report passed the Senate on a 48-45 vote on June 4, 2008. The House passed the measure on the next day by a 214-210 vote. Agreement on the FY2009 budget resolution automatically created and deemed passed in the House legislation (H.J.Res. 92) that would increase the debt limit from its current level of \$9,815 billion to \$10,615 billion. Because the Senate did not take up H.J.Res. 92, the debt limit remained at \$9,815 billion.

Subsequently, the House passed an amended version of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 (H.R. 3221) by a vote of 272-152 that included a debt limit increase to \$10,615 billion on July 23, 2008. The Senate then passed the measure on July 26 on a 72-13 vote. The President signed the bill on July 30 (P.L. 110-289), increasing the debt limit. In addition to increasing the debt limit, the act also contained provisions that would temporarily authorize the Secretary of Treasury to extend a line of credit to mortgage guarantee agencies Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae. The act also created the a new independent agency called the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA), which replaced the Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Federal Housing Enterprise Oversight (OFHEO) and the Federal Housing Finance Board (FHFB).

While CBO indicated that it was more likely than not that such intervention would not be needed, it also estimated a 5% chance of a cost to taxpayers of more than \$100 billion.⁴³ Because debt

⁴⁰ U.S. Congress, Congressional Budget Office, *An Analysis of the President's Budgetary Proposals for Fiscal Year 2009*, Table 1.1, March 2008, available at <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/89xx/doc8990/03-19-AnalPresBudget.pdf>.

⁴⁰ U.S. Congress, Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: An Update*, Table 1-1, August 2009, available at <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=10521>.

⁴¹ Goldman Sachs U.S. Research, "US Daily: The Fiscal 2008 Deficit—Likely to Top \$500 Billion," March 25, 2008.

⁴² U.S. Congress, House Committee on the Budget, *Report to Accompany H. Con. Res. 312*, 110th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Rept. 110-543, March 2008, p. 99; U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Budget, *Report to Accompany S. Res. 70*, S.Prt. 110-039, March 2008.

⁴³ U.S. Congress, Congressional Budget Office, *Cost Estimate for H.R. 3221 "Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008" As passed by the Senate on July 11, 2008, with an amendment transmitted to CBO on July 22, 2008*, July 24, 2008, available at <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/95xx/doc9597/hr3221.pdf>.

subject to limit was just \$339 billion less than the debt ceiling of \$9,815 billion when the Senate passed H.R. 3221, some financial market participants may have worried that the debt limit, without an increase, might have hindered the Treasury Secretary's ability to intervene to support Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae. On September 7, 2008, the FHFA placed Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac in conservatorship, providing FHFA with the full powers to control the assets and operations of the firms.

Since the deprivatization of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, the federal government has acted to provide stability to financial markets.⁴⁴ On September 20, 2008, the U.S. Treasury submitted a proposal to Congress to authorize the Treasury Secretary to buy mortgage-related assets in order to stabilize financial markets. The Treasury proposal would allow Treasury holdings of mortgage-related securities up to \$700 billion and would raise the debt limit to \$11,315 billion.⁴⁵ The House introduced the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (H.R. 3997), which incorporated the main tenets of the Treasury proposal including raising the debt limit to \$11,315 billion.⁴⁶ On September 29, 2008, however, the House rejected this measure. On October 1, 2008, the Senate voted on, and passed, a different version of the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (H.R. 1424) that included the same debt limit increase.⁴⁷ The House passed H.R. 1424 on October 3, 2008, and it was signed into law by the President (P.L. 110-343) on the same day, raising the debt limit to \$11,315 billion.

Current economic conditions led Congress to consider another economic stimulus measure. This measure contains both tax cuts and spending increases, which will increase the deficit by reducing revenues and increasing outlays. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA) as passed by the Senate on February 10, 2009 (Division B of the Senate Substitute amendment to H.R. 1 and S. 350), contained a provision which would raise the debt limit to \$12,140 billion. The version of this legislation originally passed by the House omitted this provision. The final conference agreement on ARRA was passed by the House and Senate on February 13, 2009, and signed by the President on February 17, 2009 (P.L. 111-5). This measure contained a provision increasing the debt limit to \$12,104 billion.

The conference report on the Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for FY2010 (S.Con.Res. 13) recommended policies that would lead to a debt subject to limit of \$13,233 billion in FY2010, a level that would require an increase in the statutory debt limit. The budget resolution also contained a revised estimate of debt subject to limit of \$12,016 billion for FY2009. The adoption of this conference report on April 29, 2009, triggered the Gephardt rule (House Rule XXVII), producing a House Joint Resolution (H.J.Res. 45) that would raise the debt limit by \$925 billion to \$13,029 billion. Under the rule, the resolution was automatically deemed passed by the House and sent to the Senate.

⁴⁴ For additional information see CRS Report RS22956, *The Cost of Government Financial Interventions, Past and Present*, by Baird Webel, Marc Labonte, and N. Eric Weiss.

⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Treasury, "Fact Sheet: Proposed Treasury Authority to Purchase Troubled Assets," Press release hp-1150, Sept. 20, 2008, available at <http://www.treas.gov/press/releases/hp1150.htm>.

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, House Financial Services Committee, Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (Amendment to the Senate Amendment to H.R. 3997), available at http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/financialsvcs_dem/amend_001_xml.pdf.

⁴⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (In the Nature of a Substitute to H.R. 1424), available at http://banking.senate.gov/public/_files/latestversionAYO08C32_xml.pdf.

In August 2009, according to media reports, Secretary of Treasury Timothy Geithner notified Congress that the debt limit would be reached in mid-October.⁴⁸ On November 4, the U.S. Treasury announced that it could postpone the time when federal debt would reach its statutory limit until the middle or the end of December.⁴⁹ Treasury dropped nearly \$185 billion from its balance sheet by reducing the amount of loans available through the Supplemental Financing Program, an emergency loan program created in the days following Lehman Brothers' bankruptcy, from \$200 billion to \$15 billion, which extended the time until the debt limit would be reached.⁵⁰ According to media reports, the Obama Administration also contemplated scaling back the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), which could also lower federal debt subject to statutory limit. Repayments of TARP funds by major financial institutions could also lower the amount of debt subject to limit.⁵¹ Other measures, such as those taken in 2003 during a "debt issuance suspension period" (described above), could also have extended the U.S. Treasury's ability to operate within the debt limit. On the other hand, the U.S. Treasury was scheduled to issue \$48 billion of nonmarketable securities to the FDIC on December 30 and to make interest payments to various federal trust funds on December 31 totaling about \$100 billion, according to Wall Street analysts, which in the absence of a debt limit increase, could have challenged Treasury's debt management activities in the absence of special accounting measures.⁵²

In mid-December, according to media reports, senior Members of the House chose to forgo a larger increase in the debt limit in favor of a smaller increase in the debt limit that would allow the U.S. Treasury Department to continue normal debt management operations for two months or so.⁵³ H.R. 4314, a measure to raise the debt limit to \$12,394 billion, was introduced on December 15, 2009, and passed by the House the next day on a 218-214 vote. The Senate passed it on December 24 by a 60-39 vote, and the President signed the measure on December 28. On January 28, the Senate passed an amended version of H.J.Res. 45 on a 60-39 vote. The measure would raise the debt ceiling by \$1,900 billion, to \$14,294 billion.⁵⁴ In addition, one amendment to impose certain pay-as-you-go (PAYGO) restrictions was approved on a 60-40 vote.⁵⁵

Some Members of Congress have called for the creation of a national commission to address federal debt and the government's fiscal situation, which could be enabled through a measure linked to an increase in the debt limit.⁵⁶ An amendment (S.Amdt. 3302 to S.Amdt. 3299) to H.J.Res. 45 that would have established a "Bipartisan Task Force for Responsible Fiscal Action" was not approved on a 53-46 vote, having failed to reach 60 votes, on January 26, 2010.

⁴⁸ *CQ Weekly*, "Fall 2009 Outlook: Debt Limit Increase," September 7, 2009, p. 1966.

⁴⁹ U.S. Treasury, "November 2009 Quarterly Refunding Statement," press release tg346, November 4, 2009, <http://www.ustreas.gov/press/releases/tg346.htm>; David Clarke and CQ Staff, "Treasury Gives Congress More Breathing Room on Debt Limit," *CQ Today Online News*, November 4, 2009.

⁵⁰ For details, see Joseph Haubrich and John Lindner, "The Supplemental Financing Program," *Economic Trends*, Federal Reserve of Chicago, September 28, 2009, available at <http://www.clevelandfed.org/research/trends/2009/1009/03monopol.cfm>.

⁵¹ *The Money Market Observer: Wrightson ICAP's Weekly Newsletter*, December 7, 2009.

⁵² *The Money Market Observer: Wrightson ICAP's Weekly Newsletter*, November 30, 2009.

⁵³ Paul Kane, "House Democrats Discard Larger Debt Limit," *Washington Post*, December 15, 2009, p. A4.

⁵⁴ *CQ Today Midday Update*, "Senate Sends Debt Ceiling Increase to House," January 28, 2010.

⁵⁵ S.Amdt. 3305. A second amendment (S.Amdt. 3300), approved on a 97-0 vote, provides certain protections to the Social Security program. Other amendments were not approved.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Weisman and John D. McKinnon, "White House Weighs New Panel to Tackle Deficit: Bipartisan Commission Considered As Administration Seeks to Show Resolve on a Problem that Dogs Its Broader Agenda," *Wall Street Journal*, November 26, 2009, p. A10.

The House approved H.J.Res. 45 on a 233-187 vote on February 4, forwarding the measure to the President. The Obama Administration had previously voiced its strong support for a debt limit increase.⁵⁷ The President signed the measure (P.L. 111-139) on February 12, 2010.

Table 2 summarizes the increases in the debt limit since 1993.⁵⁸

Table 2. Increases in the Debt Limit Since 1993

Date	Public Law (P.L.) Number	New Debt Limit (\$ billion)	Change From Previous Limit (\$ billion)
April 6, 1993	P.L. 103-12	\$4,370 ^a	\$225
August 10, 1993	P.L. 103-33	4,900	530
February 8, 1996	P.L. 104-103	(b)	—
March 12, 1996	P.L. 104-115	(c)	—
March 29, 1996	P.L. 104-121	5,500	600 ^d
August 5, 1997	P.L. 105-33	5,950	450
June 28, 2002	P.L. 107-199	6,400	450
May 27, 2003	P.L. 108-24	7,384	984
Nov. 19, 2004	P.L. 108-415	8,184	800
Mar. 20, 2006	P.L. 109-182	8,965	781
Sept. 29, 2007	P.L. 110-91	9,815	850
July 30, 2008	P.L. 110-289	10,615	800
Oct. 3, 2008	P.L. 110-343	11,315	700
Feb. 17, 2009	P.L. 111-5	12,104	789
Dec. 28, 2009	P.L. 111-123	12,394	290
February 12, 2010	P.L. 111-139	14,294	1,900

Source: CRS, compiled using the Legislative Information System, available at <http://www.congress.gov>; OMB.

- a. Increased the debt limit temporarily through September 30, 1993.
- b. Temporarily exempted from limit obligations in an amount equal to the monthly insurance benefits payable under Title II of the Social Security Act in March 1996, the exemption to expire on the earlier of an increase in the limit or March 15, 1996.
- c. Temporarily exempted from limit (a) obligations in an amount equal to the monthly insurance benefits payable under Title II of the Social Security Act in March 1996 and (b) certain obligations issued to trust funds and other Federal Government accounts, both exemptions to expire on the earlier of an increase in the limit or March 30, 1996.
- d. Difference from debt limit set on August 10, 1983.

⁵⁷ U.S. Office of Management and Budget, “H.J.Res. 45—Increasing the Statutory Limit on the Public Debt,” Statement Of Administration Policy, January 20, 2010, available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/assets/sap_111/saphjr45s_20100120.pdf.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of earlier debt limit increases, see CRS Report 98-805 E, *Public Debt Limit Legislation: A Brief History and Controversies In the 1980s and 1990s*, by Philip D. Winters, which is available from the authors upon request.

Deficit Estimates

The size of the debt may remain a concern in the future due to the size of impending federal deficits necessitating further increases in the debt limit. CBO warns that the current trajectory of federal borrowing is unsustainable and could lead to slower economic growth in the long run as debt rises as a percentage of GDP. The total federal deficit rose from \$455 billion in FY2008 to \$1,413 billion in FY2009, and is estimated to reach \$1,342 billion in FY2010.⁵⁹ Much of the increase in deficits can be attributed to weak economic and financial market turmoil that started in late 2007, as well as to federal responses. Nonetheless, many budget experts remain concerned that a slow economic recovery or a “double-dip” recession could keep federal revenues below previous trendline projections for several years, and that the federal government would continue to run large deficits.

Concluding Comments

Since the late 1950s, the federal government increased its borrowing from the public in all years, except in FY1969 following imposition of a war surcharge and in the period FY1997-FY2001. The persistence of federal budget deficits has required the government to issue more and more debt to the public.⁶⁰ The accumulation of Social Security and other trust funds, particularly after 1983 when recommendations of the Greenspan Commission were implemented, led to sustained growth in government-held debt subject to limit.⁶¹ The growth in federal debt held by the public and in intergovernmental accounts, such as trust funds, has periodically obliged Congress to raise the debt limit.

Between August 1997, when the debt limit was raised to \$5,950 billion, and the beginning of FY2002 in October 2001, federal budget surpluses reduced debt held by the public. From the end of FY2001, the last fiscal year with a surplus, until the end of FY2008, debt held by the public subject to limit grew by \$2,484 billion. Federal debt held in intergovernmental accounts grew steadily throughout the period, rising by \$1,743 billion since the beginning of FY2002.

In early 2001, the 10-year budget forecasts projected large and growing surpluses, indicating rapid reduction in debt held by the public. Some experts expressed concern about consequences of retiring all federal debt held by the public.⁶² Most long-term forecasts computed at that time, however, showed large deficits emerging once the baby boomers began to retire. Short-term forecasts projected continuous growth in debt held by government accounts, largely due to the difference between Social Security tax revenues and benefit payments. The combination of falling levels of publicly held debt and rising levels of debt held by government accounts moderated the expected growth of total debt. The moderate growth in total debt those projections had forecast

⁵⁹ U.S. Congressional Budget Office, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: An Update*, August 19, 2010, p. 1, available at <http://www.cbo.gov/doc.cfm?index=11705>.

⁶⁰ The ability to run fiscal deficits gives the federal government useful flexibility in managing its finances, although large deficits may harm economic performance. See CRS Report RL33657, *Running Deficits: Positives and Pitfalls*, by D. Andrew Austin.

⁶¹ *Report of the National Commission on Social Security Reform*, January 1983, available at <http://www.ssa.gov/history/reports/gspan.html>.

⁶² Testimony of Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan, in U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on the Budget, *Outlook for the Federal Budget and Implications for Fiscal Policy*, hearings, 107th Cong., 1st sess., January 25, 2001, available at <http://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/testimony/2001/20010125/default.htm>.

was expected to postpone the need to increase the debt limit until late into the decade, when accumulating debt in government accounts would overtake reductions in debt held by the public.

New budget projections released in early 2002 smashed expectations of large, persistent surpluses, and hopes for reductions in debt held by the public collapsed. The return to large federal deficits accelerated the growth of total debt. Increases in the debt limit would be necessary much sooner than previously expected.

Early in 2003, the FY2003 deficit and the persistent rise in debt held by government accounts drove the federal debt up to the \$6,400 billion limit in effect at the time. The Treasury avoided breaching the limit into May. Congress adopted a debt limit increase of \$934 billion on May 23, 2003, that provided enough room for the growing federal debt through the fall of 2004. The debt limit increase passed by Congress late in 2004 was expected, at the time, to accommodate the government's debt growth well into 2005, if not into early 2006. In late December 2005, and early in 2006, the Treasury informed Congress that the limit would be reached between mid-February and mid-March 2006. On March 16, 2006, the Senate passed the House-initiated debt limit increase, raising the debt limit to \$8,965 billion. The debt limit crisis was resolved when the President signed the debt limit increase on March 20.

Smaller than expected deficits in FY2006 and FY2007 postponed, but did not end the need for a new, higher debt limit. The House passed legislation in May 2007 (H.J.Res. 43) to raise the debt limit. The Senate passed the measure (P.L. 110-91) on September 27, which the President signed on September 29. Turmoil in some financial markets in August 2007, according to some observers, appeared to constrain contention over the debt limit increase.

The 2008 economic slowdown, which reduced federal tax revenues and increased federal outlays, caused federal deficit spending to rise, thus bringing forward the projected date when the federal debt will reach its current limit. The House passed an amended version of the Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008 (H.R. 3221) that included a debt limit increase to \$10,615 billion on July 23, 2008. The Senate passed the measure on July 26, and the President signed it on July 30, raising the debt limit for the first time in 2008. Subsequently, the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008 (H.R. 1424), signed into law on October 3 (P.L. 110-343), raised the debt limit for the second time in 2008 to \$11,315 billion. The debt limit was raised for the third time in less than a year as a result of passage of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. President Obama signed this measure on February 17, 2009 (P.L. 111-5), which raised the debt limit to \$12,104 billion.

The debt limit was again raised in late 2009. H.R. 4314, passed by the House on December 16, 2009, and by the Senate on December 24, raised the debt limit to \$12,394 billion when the President signed the measure on December 28. In early 2010, Congress voted for a larger increase in the debt limit, which would put the limit at \$14,294 billion, raising the debt ceiling by \$1,900 billion. President Obama signed the measure on February 12, 2010. The new debt limit, according to projections, is high enough to allow the Treasury Department to issue new debt at projected levels well into FY2011.

Amendments offered during consideration of the latest debt limit increase may signal a growing concern with the fiscal sustainability. One amendment, which was not approved, would have established a statutory commission to consider long-term fiscal issues. Another amendment,

which was approved, would impose certain PAYGO restrictions.⁶³ Over the next decade, without major changes in federal policies, persistent and possibly growing deficits, along with the ongoing growth in the debt holdings of government accounts, would increase substantially the amount of federal debt subject to limit. Unless federal policies change, Congress would repeatedly face demands to raise the debt limit to accommodate the growing federal debt in order to provide the government with the means to meet its financial obligations.

Further Reading

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⁶³ For a discussion of PAYGO in the past, see CRS Report R41005, *The Statutory PAYGO Process for Budget Enforcement: 1991-2002*, by Robert Keith.

Appendix. Debt Subject to Limit by Month Since September 2001

Table A-1 provides data on the dollar amount, in current dollars, of federal debt and the changes in these amounts by month between the end of September 2001 (the end of FY2001) and the end of August 2010. The table shows outstanding monthly balances, subject to the debt limit, of total federal debt, debt held by government accounts, and debt held by the public.

All three measures of debt subject to limit increased over this period. From the end of September 2001 (the end of FY2001) to the end of September 2009 (the most recently completed fiscal year), total federal debt increased by \$6,121 billion, debt held in government accounts increased by \$1,889 billion, and debt held by the public increased by \$4,232 billion. All three measures experienced periodic reductions in some months. Because federal receipts and outlays are spread unevenly over the fiscal year, debt may rise or fall in a given month, even if debt measures follow an overall increasing trend.

Table A-1. Debt Subject to Limit by Month, September 2001-August 2010
(in millions of current dollars)

End of Month	Total	Change from Previous Period	Held by Government Accounts	Change from Previous Period	Held by the Public	Change from Previous Period
Sept. 2001	\$5,732,802	—	\$2,436,521	—	\$3,296,281	—
Oct. 2001	5,744,523	\$11,721	2,451,815	\$15,294	3,292,709	\$-3,572
Nov. 2001	5,816,823	72,300	2,469,647	17,832	3,347,176	54,467
Dec. 2001	5,871,413	54,590	2,516,012	46,365	3,355,401	8,225
Jan. 2002	5,865,892	-5,521	2,525,755	9,743	3,340,138	-15,263
Feb. 2002	5,933,154	67,262	2,528,494	2,739	3,404,659	64,521
Mar. 2002	5,935,108	1,954	2,528,318	-176	3,406,789	2,130
Apr. 2002	5,914,816	-20,292	2,549,438	21,120	3,365,378	-41,411
May 2002	5,949,975	35,159	2,553,350	3,912	3,396,625	31,247
June 2002	6,058,313	108,338	2,630,646	77,296	3,427,667	31,042
July 2002	6,092,050	33,737	2,627,980	-2,666	3,464,070	36,403
Aug. 2002	6,142,835	50,785	2,620,946	-7,034	3,521,890	57,820
Sept. 2002	6,161,431	18,596	2,644,244	23,298	3,517,187	-4,703
Oct. 2002	6,231,284	69,853	2,680,812	36,568	3,550,472	33,285
Nov. 2002	6,294,480	63,196	2,680,788	-24	3,613,692	63,220
Dec. 2002	6,359,412	64,932	2,745,787	64,999	3,613,625	-67
Jan. 2003	6,355,812	-3,600	2,753,301	7,514	3,602,511	-11,114
Feb. 2003	6,399,975	44,163	2,750,471	-2,830	3,649,504	46,993
Mar. 2003	6,399,975	0	2,722,812	-27,659	3,677,163	27,659

End of Month	Total	Change from Previous Period	Held by Government Accounts	Change from Previous Period	Held by the Public	Change from Previous Period
Apr. 2003	6,399,975	0	2,731,042	8,230	3,668,933	-8,230
May 2003	6,498,658	98,683	2,755,895	24,853	3,742,763	73,830
June 2003	6,625,519	126,861	2,842,361	86,466	3,783,158	40,395
July 2003	6,704,814	79,295	2,835,566	-6,795	3,869,247	86,089
Aug. 2003	6,743,775	38,961	2,829,387	-6,179	3,914,388	45,141
Sept. 2003	6,737,553	-6,222	2,846,730	17,343	3,890,823	-23,565
Oct. 2003	6,826,668	89,115	2,869,493	22,763	3,957,175	66,352
Nov. 2003	6,879,626	52,958	2,879,117	9,624	4,000,509	43,334
Dec. 2003	6,952,893	73,267	2,940,736	61,619	4,012,157	11,648
Jan. 2004	6,966,851	13,958	2,951,219	10,483	4,015,633	3,476
Feb. 2004	7,049,163	82,312	2,953,123	1,904	4,096,040	80,407
Mar. 2004	7,088,648	39,485	2,941,195	-11,928	4,147,453	51,413
Apr. 2004	7,089,700	1,052	2,960,151	18,956	4,129,549	-17,904
May 2004	7,151,523	61,823	2,973,869	13,718	4,177,653	48,104
June 2004	7,229,320	77,797	3,039,987	66,118	4,189,334	11,681
July 2004	7,271,328	42,008	3,033,396	-6,591	4,237,933	48,599
Aug. 2004	7,305,531	34,203	3,037,149	3,753	4,268,382	30,449
Sept. 2004	7,333,350	27,819	3,056,590	19,441	4,276,760	8,378
Oct. 2004	7,383,975	50,625	3,096,207	39,617	4,287,768	11,008
Nov. 2004	7,464,740	80,765	3,087,834	-8,373	4,376,906	89,138
Dec. 2004	7,535,644	70,904	3,158,531	70,697	4,377,114	208
Jan. 2005	7,567,702	32,058	3,171,089	12,558	4,396,615	19,501
Feb. 2005	7,652,726	85,024	3,176,406	5,317	4,476,320	79,705
Mar. 2005	7,715,503	62,777	3,175,460	-946	4,540,042	63,722
Apr. 2005	7,704,041	-11,462	3,185,364	9,904	4,518,677	-21,365
May 2005	7,717,574	13,533	3,207,232	21,868	4,510,342	-8,335
June 2005	7,778,128	60,554	3,280,914	73,682	4,497,214	-13,128
July 2005	7,829,029	50,901	3,278,725	-2,189	4,550,304	53,090
Aug. 2005	7,868,395	39,366	3,284,696	5,971	4,583,699	33,395
Sept. 2005	7,871,040	2,645	3,300,969	16,273	4,570,071	-13,628
Oct. 2005	7,964,782	93,742	3,345,589	44,620	4,619,193	49,122
Nov. 2005	8,028,918	64,136	3,351,093	5,504	4,677,826	58,633
Dec. 2005	8,107,019	78,101	3,424,304	73,211	4,682,715	4,889
Jan. 2006	8,132,290	25,271	3,442,543	18,239	4,689,747	7,032
Feb. 2006	8,183,975	51,685	3,457,409	14,866	4,726,567	36,820

End of Month	Total	Change from Previous Period	Held by Government Accounts	Change from Previous Period	Held by the Public	Change from Previous Period
Mar. 2006	8,281,451	97,476	3,443,602	-13,807	4,837,849	111,282
Apr. 2006	8,262,718	-18,733	3,479,623	36,021	4,783,095	-54,754
May 2006	8,263,812	1,094	3,492,648	13,025	4,771,165	-11,930
June 2006	8,330,646	66,834	3,566,186	73,538	4,764,460	-6,705
July 2006	8,352,614	21,968	3,569,550	3,364	4,783,064	18,604
Aug. 2006	8,423,321	70,707	3,576,166	6,616	4,847,155	64,091
Sept. 2006	8,420,278	-3,043	3,622,378	46,212	4,828,972	-18,183
Oct. 2006	8,498,016	77,738	3,650,241	27,863	4,847,775	18,803
Nov. 2006	8,545,715	47,699	3,649,736	-505	4,895,979	48,204
Dec. 2006	8,592,513	46,798	3,724,450	74,714	4,868,063	-27,916
Jan. 2007	8,619,499	26,986	3,737,894	13,444	4,881,605	13,542
Feb. 2007	8,690,921	71,422	3,744,299	6,405	4,946,622	65,017
Mar. 2007	8,760,735	69,814	3,740,127	-4,172	5,020,608	73,986
Apr. 2007	8,753,070	-7,665	3,778,255	38,128	4,974,815	-45,793
May 2007	8,740,892	-12,178	3,792,201	13,946	4,948,691	-26,124
June 2007	8,779,168	38,276	3,867,819	75,618	4,911,348	-37,343
July 2007	8,845,417	66,249	3,873,239	5,420	4,972,178	60,830
Aug. 2007	8,918,493	73,076	3,854,115	-19,124	5,064,377	92,199
Sept. 2007	8,921,343	2,850	3,903,710	49,595	5,017,633	-46,744
Oct. 2007	8,994,639	73,296	3,958,357	54,647	5,036,281	18,648
Nov. 2007	9,065,827	71,188	3,950,468	-7,889	5,115,358	79,077
Dec. 2007	9,144,715	78,888	4,038,566	88,098	5,106,149	-9,209
Jan. 2008	9,155,842	11,127	4,053,199	14,633	5,102,644	-3,505
Feb. 2008	9,275,683	119,841	4,045,007	-8,192	5,230,676	128,032
Mar. 2008	9,358,135	82,452	4,051,685	6,678	5,306,450	75,774
Apr. 2008	9,298,567	-59,568	4,080,887	29,202	5,217,680	-88,770
May 2008	9,324,137	25,570	4,071,992	-8,895	5,252,144	34,464
June 2008	9,427,901	167,869	4,169,509	134,950	5,258,392	32,920
July 2008	9,520,220	92,319	4,144,377	-25,132	5,375,843	117,451
Aug. 2008	9,580,508	60,288	4,129,413	-14,964	5,451,095	75,252
Sept. 2008	9,959,850	379,342	4,179,574	50,161	5,780,276	329,181
Oct. 2008	10,504,702	544,852	4,231,878	52,304	6,272,824	492,548
Nov. 2008	10,595,725	91,023	4,228,270	-3,608	6,367,454	94,630
Dec. 2008	10,640,274	44,549	4,298,482	70,212	6,341,792	-25,662
Jan. 2009	10,569,310	-70,964	4,278,424	-20,058	6,290,886	-50,906

End of Month	Total	Change from Previous Period	Held by Government Accounts	Change from Previous Period	Held by the Public	Change from Previous Period
Feb. 2009	10,814,630	245,320	4,261,734	-16,690	6,552,896	262,010
Mar. 2009	11,066,217	251,587	4,258,272	-3,462	6,807,946	255,050
Apr. 2009	11,178,827	112,610	4,273,005	14,733	6,905,822	97,876
May 2009	11,260,445	81,618	4,265,719	-7,286	6,994,725	88,903
June 2009	11,487,470	227,025	4,336,673	70,954	7,150,797	156,072
July 2009	11,611,178	123,708	4,299,673	-37,000	7,311,505	160,708
Aug. 2009	11,755,205	144,027	4,294,923	-4,750	7,460,282	148,777
Sept. 2009	11,853,434	98,229	4,325,124	30,201	7,528,311	68,029
Oct. 2009	11,836,629	-16,805	4,372,308	47,184	7,464,321	-63,990
Nov. 2009	12,057,363	220,734	4,367,935	-4,373	7,689,428	225,107
Dec. 2009	12,254,506	197,143	4,466,279	98,344	7,788,227	98,799
Jan. 2010	12,222,507	-31,999	4,485,502	19,223	7,737,005	-51,222
Feb. 2010	12,383,717	161,210	4,469,373	-16,129	7,914,344	177,339
Mar. 2010	12,716,511	332,794	4,448,645	-20,728	8,267,866	353,522
Apr. 2010	12,892,729	176,218	4,480,458	31,813	8,412,271	144,405
May 2010	12,992,539	99,810	4,498,120	17,662	8,494,419	82,148
June 2010	13,149,560	157,021	4,537,716	39,596	8,611,844	117,425
July 2010	13,185,208	35,648	4,504,601	-33,115	8,680,607	68,763
Aug. 2010	13,398,794	213,586	4,493,418	-11,183	8,905,376	224,769

Source: U.S. Treasury, Bureau of the Public Debt, *Monthly Statement of the Public Debt*, Sept. 2001-Aug. 2010, available at <http://www.treasurydirect.gov/govt/reports/pd/mspd/mspd.htm>; CRS calculations.

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