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by Tom Rooney

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Over the last few weeks, Congress and the country have debated a proposal to extend unemployment benefits. The Democrats' proposal, which the House of Representatives rejected, would extend until February unemployment benefits for up to 99 weeks. This proposal would cost more than \$12 billion, and it was not offset with spending cuts, or "paid for." Democrats refused to allow amendments to pay for the proposal, so the bill failed.

I would support a short-term extension of unemployment benefits if Congress found a way to pay for it. That should not be difficult. There are more than \$250 billion in unspent stimulus dollars that could pay for necessary new spending programs, like a short-term extension of unemployment benefits, and begin slashing the deficit.

Our country is in deep financial trouble. Over the past two years, the federal government has racked up the two highest deficits on record, and our national debt is almost \$14 trillion. If we don't act soon to get spending under control, we will be leaving our children a country in far worse shape than the one we inherited.

This newspaper has weighed in on the debate repeatedly, running four opinion pieces (including one by the editorial board) and at least three letters criticizing my vote against an unpaid-for extension. I am sure this newspaper does not believe that we should continue to spend money that we don't have, borrowing it from China and leaving the debt for the next generation, rather than making sensible and necessary cuts. Yet that would be the result of its position. Ultimately, that is the issue that divides us — do we pay for these benefits or leave the bill for the next generation?

This is a critical issue, and it deserves an open and informative debate. I understand that some disagree with my position, and I respect their views. However, I am disappointed that this newspaper has not provided its readers with a balanced debate on this issue, running seven letters and opinion pieces supporting an unpaid-for extension and just one urging Congress to pay for an extension. I am even more disappointed that rather than have an informed, adult conversation about whether to pay for unemployment benefits, this newspaper has resorted to personal attacks against me. One columnist accused me of using the unemployed as "pawns" and putting "political grandstanding" over people, and said that when unemployment checks stopped coming, I "got what (I) wanted." Nothing could be further from the truth. As a member of the minority party in Congress, I have no input into which bills come before the House or what those bills include. The party in power made the decision not to allow one single vote on amendments to pay for the extension, digging in its heels to keep spending money we don't have. The Democrats held a vote they knew would fail in order to point fingers rather than address our job shortage and fiscal crisis.

The editorial board accuses me of being "hypocritical" for supporting tax cuts but insisting that unemployment benefits be offset. Apparently the board is unaware that I proposed more than \$4 trillion in spending cuts, which would more than offset any lost revenue from a full extension of the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts. The board says that people losing benefits is "OK with U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney," and suggests that I do not have "actual concern" for the unemployed. I do. I lie awake at night worrying about the people struggling in our district, and I am fighting hard to boost job creation throughout Florida. I am confident that in the next two years, with a new party controlling the House, our ideas to help small businesses and boost job creation will finally gain traction.

The editorial board also struck below the belt by asserting that "Finding a job probably never has been a worry for Rooney." Well, I spent four years in the U.S. Army JAG Corps. I was the CEO of a home for abused and neglected children. Now I serve my country and my constituents as best I can in the House of Representatives. My goal is to do all I can to help everyone in our district have the same opportunities.

In the future, I hope that this newspaper will keep its personal insults to a minimum and focus on the big issues at hand. We clearly have different opinions, and the editorial board and I plainly disagree about how to address the fiscal disaster we're facing. A newspaper's opinion page should be a place to air those differences in a professional and civilized manner — not a place for personal potshots.