[Larry Beinhart](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/larry-beinhart)

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**The relief bill**

On December 21, the United States Senate finally passed a pandemic relief bill. The most attention-grabbing part of this legislation is the direct payments of $600 to almost every American.

A day later President Donald Trump got on TV and called it a “disgrace”.

“It’s called the COVID Relief Bill but it has almost nothing to do with COVID,” he declared, adding that Congress should “immediately get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation” and “increase the ridiculously low $600 to $2,000”.

It was a shock. He had never said anything remotely like that before.

So what happens next? Will he veto the bill, just as he vetoed the military spending bill on December 23?

As he so often does, Trump has latched on to a piece of reality then joyfully spun it into a huge misrepresentation. It is correct that the bill which passed on December 21 is constantly described as the COVID Relief Bill, but it is actually not.

It is actually part of an omnibus spending bill – a large package of smaller spending bills – called the House Amendment to the Senate Amendment to HR 133 and subtitled the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021.

It is 5,593 pages long and the COVID-19 relief legislation – worth about $900bn – is part of it. The other sheaves come to $1.4 trillion, for a total of $2.3 trillion. As a point of reference, the federal budget for 2020 was $4.79 trillion.

The bundle is not just bags of money. It covers some vital things, a mixed bag of government spending, as well as some very special favours for very special interests – a regular feature of almost every US government action.

The battle over the COVID relief part of the bill started in July, when the Democrats in the House of Representatives passed a pandemic stimulus package just as the previous one – voted in three months earlier – was about to expire. The bill then was passed on to the Republican-controlled Senate, where the GOP demanded things the Democrats would not accept – like protection from lawsuits for companies that did not properly protect their employees from the coronavirus – and offered little that they would accept.

The back-and-forth on the bill continued as the second wave of COVID-19 infections hit. In early December, a group of moderate Republicans and Democrats in the House, plus a few in the Senate came up with “a compromise package”. There was a lot of genuine give on both sides.

It was, in many ways, a return to normalcy. The bill was so huge and went through so fast that it was clear that the members of Congress who voted for it – and the few who voted against it – had not actually read it. That is actually far more normal than not.

The bill is written in such a way that unless you are very familiar with the history of each particular item, you would not know if it is going up, down, or sideways. Which is also normal.

It is a bulging Santa’s bag of special treats: it creates medication and safety standards for horse racing, makes illegal streaming of music and films a felony, provides for sanctions against any Chinese official who interferes with the selection of the next Dalai Lama, authorises the creation of a National Museum of the American Latino and a Smithsonian American Women’s History Museum, allocates $1.375bn for Trump’s wall on the US-Mexican border, foreign aid for Cambodia, Nepal, Burma, Ukraine, Pakistan, Egypt, and Sudan, some money for Israel and Jordan, and funding for one new submarine (even just one is expensive), eight submarine-hunting aircraft, sexual abstinence programmes, and Space Force. Packing such things into big, must-pass legislation is very normal.

The bill also includes the necessary authorisation of government spending which needs to be passed in order for the government to continue working. If the legislation does not pass, this threatens another government shutdown.

The Covid relief portion of the bill extends unemployment insurance benefits for an extra 11 weeks and adds $300 a week to those benefits. It also extends payroll protection (forgivable loans to businesses for keeping people on the job), eviction bans and provides some assistance for renters, childcare, education, food stamps, and, of course, the $600 for most adults and for their dependent children, which Trump calls a disgrace.

Democrats tried an instant pudding response, unanimous consent to an amendment to raise the $600 to the $2,000 that Trump had called for. It was the amount that the Democrats had wanted to begin with.

Excerpted: ‘What is the fight over the ‘COVID relief bill’ all about?’

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