



Testimony

Before the Committee on the Budget,  
U.S. Senate

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# THE NATION'S FISCAL HEALTH

## Action Is Needed to Address the Federal Government's Fiscal Future

Accessible Version

Statement of Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States

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Chairman Enzi, Ranking Member Sanders, and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss our report on the fiscal condition and long-term fiscal path of the U.S. government.

Long-term fiscal projections by GAO, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and in *the 2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government (2019 Financial Report)* all show that, absent policy changes, the federal government continues to face an unsustainable long-term fiscal path.<sup>1</sup>

Although the assumptions in each of these projections vary somewhat, all result in the same conclusion: over the long term, the imbalance between spending and revenue that is built into current law and policy will lead to (1) deficits exceeding \$1 trillion each year beginning in fiscal year 2020, and (2) both the annual deficit and the cumulative total debt held by the public continuing to grow as shares of gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>2</sup> This situation—in which debt grows faster than GDP—means the current federal fiscal path is unsustainable.

Decisions in the near term to support economic growth and address the security and social challenges the nation faces need to be accompanied by a broader fiscal plan to put the federal government on a sustainable long-term path. This is essential to ensure that the United States remains in a strong economic position to meet its security and social needs. It is also necessary to preserve flexibility to address potentially urgent or

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<sup>1</sup>The Financial Report is prepared each year by the Secretary of the Treasury, in coordination with the Director of the Office of Management and Budget. The *2019 Financial Report's* Statement of Long-Term Fiscal Projections presents, for all the activities of the federal government, the present value of projected receipts and noninterest spending under current policy without change, the relationship of these amounts to projected GDP, and changes in the present value of projected receipts and noninterest spending from the prior year.

<sup>2</sup>For more information on these assumptions, see appendix I of the report being released in conjunction with this testimony, GAO, *The Nation's Fiscal Health: Action Is Needed to Address the Federal Government's Fiscal Future*, [GAO-20-403SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 12, 2020).

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unforeseen events, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, cyberattacks, and military conflicts.

GAO's Fiscal Health report provides information on (1) the unsustainable fiscal path and its primary drivers, (2) growing fiscal pressures that could further strain the federal budget, (3) why it is important to change the fiscal path, and (4) the need to take a new approach to managing the debt.

My statement is based upon our 2020 annual report on the nation's fiscal health, which leverages our fiscal year 2019 audit of the U.S. government's consolidated financial statements; our work on natural disasters; 2019 High-Risk List; the 2019 fragmentation, overlap, and duplication annual report; and other related work.<sup>3</sup> The work upon which this statement is based was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

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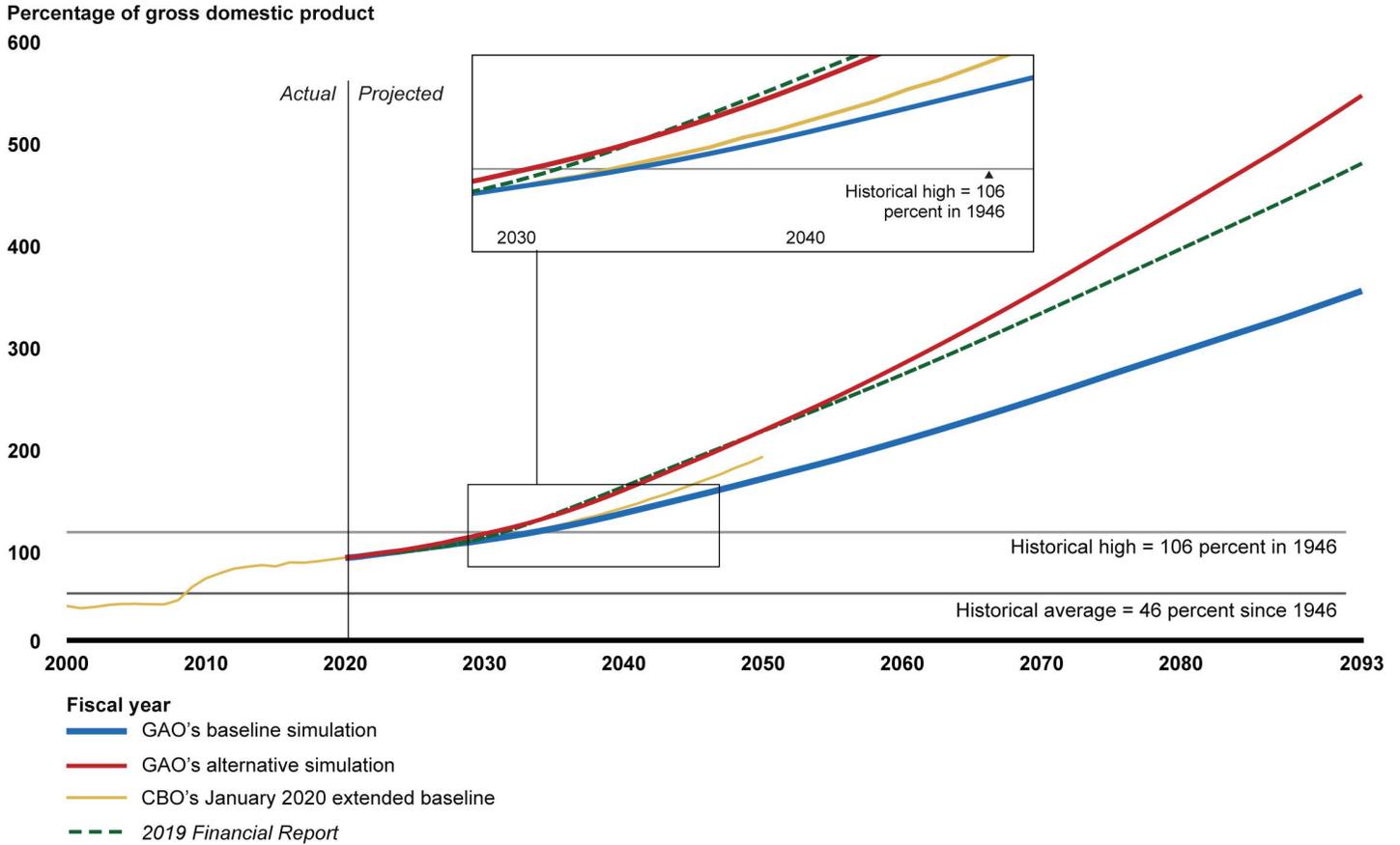
## The Federal Government Is on an Unsustainable Fiscal Path

By the end of fiscal year 2019, the federal debt held by the public had climbed to 79 percent of GDP. By comparison, such debt has averaged 46 percent of GDP annually since 1946. If current trends continue, debt as a share of GDP will exceed the historic high 1946 level of 106 percent of GDP within 11 to 14 years. In 2050, it will be nearly twice that level and about four times its post-World War II average. Figure 1 shows that in GAO, CBO, and 2019 *Financial Report* projections, debt held by the public as a share of GDP grows substantially over time.

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<sup>3</sup>GAO, *2019 Annual Report: Additional Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Billions in Financial Benefits*, [GAO-19-285SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 21, 2019); *High-Risk Series: Substantial Efforts Needed to Achieve Greater Progress on High-Risk Areas*, [GAO-19-157SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 6, 2019); and *Financial Audit: Fiscal Years 2019 and 2018 Consolidated Financial Statements of the U.S. Government*, [GAO-20-315R](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb 27, 2020).

**Figure 1: Debt Held by the Public under Projections from GAO, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and the 2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government**



Sources: GAO, Congressional Budget Office, and 2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government. | GAO-20-482T

Note: For information on the assumptions made in GAO's simulations, see [GAO-20-403SP](#), appendix I.

**Accessible Data for Figure 1: Debt Held by the Public under Projections from GAO, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and the 2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government**

Fiscal year	GAO's baseline simulation	GAO's alternative simulation	CBO's January 2020 extended baseline	2019 Financial Report
2000	.	.	33.702	.
2001	.	.	31.536	.
2002	.	.	32.68	.
2003	.	.	34.682	.
2004	.	.	35.72	.
2005	.	.	35.781	.
2006	.	.	35.407	.
2007	.	.	35.233	.
2008	.	.	39.361	.
2009	.	.	52.278	.
2010	.	.	60.779	.
2011	.	.	65.752	.
2012	.	.	70.259	.
2013	.	.	72.169	.
2014	.	.	73.721	.
2015	.	.	72.470	.
2016	.	.	76.356	.
2017	.	.	76.035	.
2018	.	.	77.449	.
2019	.	.	79.185	.
2020	80.752	81.032	81	80.61066
2021	82.009	82.417	82	82.43866
2022	83.900	84.454	84	84.0789
2023	85.646	86.363	86	85.46282
2024	87.284	88.208	87	86.54328
2025	89.399	90.577	89	87.96609
2026	91.239	93.001	91	89.71304
2027	92.644	95.555	93	91.73983
2028	94.669	98.800	95	94.39941
2029	96.166	101.485	96	97.2733
2030	98.263	104.539	98	100.6292
2031	100.255	107.580	101	104.4419
2032	102.392	110.870	103	108.7142
2033	104.676	114.413	106	113.4666

Letter

<b>Fiscal year</b>	<b>GAO's baseline simulation</b>	<b>GAO's alternative simulation</b>	<b>CBO's January 2020 extended baseline</b>	<b>2019 Financial Report</b>
2034	107.111	118.319	109	118.4426
2035	109.676	122.481	112	123.5549
2036	112.393	126.905	115	128.8012
2037	115.249	131.587	119	134.1547
2038	118.241	136.527	122	139.5924
2039	121.358	141.724	126	145.0835
2040	124.621	147.205	130	150.5825
2041	127.903	152.822	134	156.1102
2042	131.198	158.475	139	161.6422
2043	134.527	164.190	143	167.1239
2044	137.834	169.896	148	172.5842
2045	141.153	175.645	153	178.0334
2046	144.478	181.428	158	183.4595
2047	147.942	187.415	163	188.8737
2048	151.412	193.438	169	194.2954
2049	154.901	199.494	174	199.6943
2050	158.413	205.598	180	205.069
2051	161.933	211.740	.	210.4752
2052	165.463	217.928	.	215.898
2053	169.007	224.161	.	221.3055
2054	172.584	230.449	.	226.7369
2055	176.198	236.801	.	232.2231
2056	179.972	243.393	.	237.7611
2057	183.827	250.115	.	243.3376
2058	187.715	256.902	.	248.9565
2059	191.648	263.766	.	254.6307
2060	195.624	270.711	.	260.3598
2061	199.647	277.728	.	266.1442
2062	203.712	284.818	.	271.9914
2063	207.823	291.978	.	277.8999
2064	211.976	299.222	.	283.8686
2065	216.176	306.542	.	289.8918
2066	220.416	313.940	.	295.9644
2067	224.703	321.424	.	302.081
2068	229.045	328.996	.	308.2353
2069	233.432	336.656	.	314.4218

Fiscal year	GAO's baseline simulation	GAO's alternative simulation	CBO's January 2020 extended baseline	2019 Financial Report
2070	237.857	344.398	.	320.6442
2071	242.332	352.224	.	326.8944
2072	246.850	360.128	.	333.1639
2073	251.407	368.111	.	339.4463
2074	256.002	376.172	.	345.7314
2075	260.641	384.311	.	352.0207
2076	265.116	392.239	.	358.3139
2077	269.539	400.117	.	364.6057
2078	273.977	408.050	.	370.9004
2079	278.420	416.019	.	377.199
2080	282.868	424.022	.	383.5043
2081	287.317	432.054	.	389.8016
2082	291.767	440.127	.	396.0972
2083	296.204	448.225	.	402.3951
2084	300.630	456.337	.	408.6992
2085	305.054	464.477	.	415.023
2086	309.472	472.647	.	421.3771
2087	313.880	480.838	.	427.7653
2088	318.522	489.419	.	434.1973
2089	323.258	498.173	.	440.686
2090	328.006	506.973	.	447.2357
2091	332.778	515.833	.	453.8449
2092	337.562	524.751	.	460.5198
2093	342.370	533.727	.	467.2609

Sources: GAO, Congressional Budget Office, and *2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government*. | GAO-20-482T

## Spending Outlook Is Driven by Health Care and Net Interest on the Debt

Under GAO, CBO, and the *2019 Financial Report* projections, spending for the major health and retirement programs grows more rapidly than GDP in coming decades. This is a consequence of both an aging population and projected continued increases in health care costs per

beneficiary. Medicare spending is expected to exceed \$1 trillion per year by fiscal year 2026, and Social Security spending already exceeds \$1 trillion per year.<sup>1</sup>

However, according to the projections, these spending categories will eventually be overtaken by spending on net interest, which primarily consists of interest costs on the federal government's debt held by the public. In recent years, persistently low interest rates have resulted in lower interest costs for the government than previously projected. Despite these low interest rates, spending on net interest grew from \$263 billion in 2017 to \$376 billion in 2019. That \$376 billion is 8.4 percent of total federal spending, which exceeded combined spending on agriculture, transportation, and veterans' benefits and services.

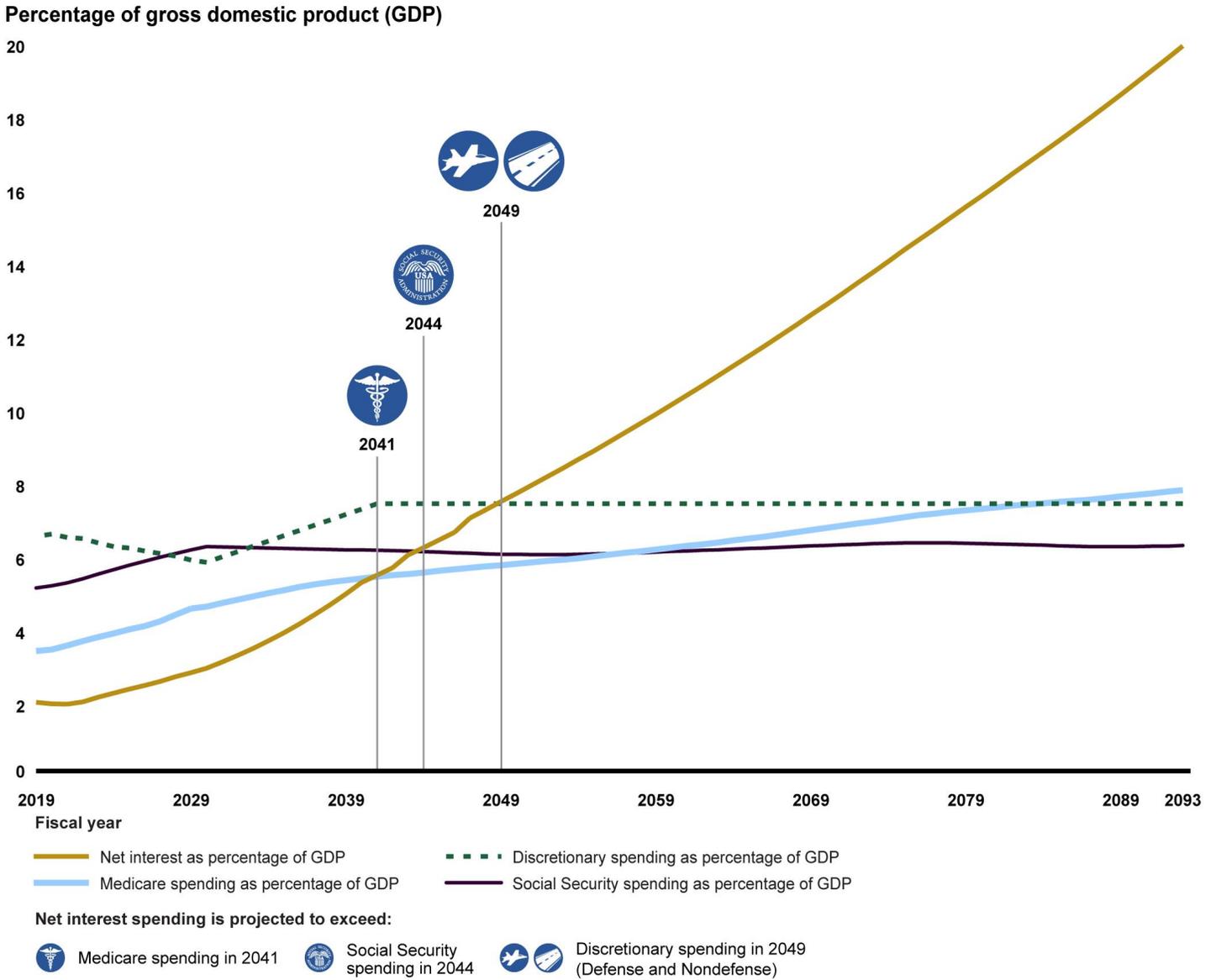
Going forward, both interest rates and the debt are projected to grow, which means spending on net interest is projected to grow faster than any other component of the budget.<sup>2</sup> In 2032, spending on net interest is projected to exceed \$1 trillion annually. Over the past 50 years, net interest costs have averaged 2 percent of GDP but these costs are projected to increase to 7.2 percent by 2049. As figure 2 shows, we project that as a share of GDP, net interest spending will exceed Medicare spending in 2041, Social Security spending in 2044, and total Discretionary spending in 2049.

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<sup>1</sup>Medicaid spending is projected to exceed \$1 trillion per year by fiscal year 2026 as well but includes both state and federal spending.

<sup>2</sup>GAO's long-term fiscal projections use CBO's projected interest rates. In its January 2020 *Budget and Economic Outlook*, CBO lowered its interest rate projections, estimating that the average interest rate on debt held by the public will rise from 2.5 percent in fiscal year 2019 to 2.8 percent in fiscal year 2030. This projection is lower than CBO's previous projection that rates would rise to 3.5 percent in fiscal year 2029. See CBO, *The Budget and Economic Outlook: 2020 to 2030* (Washington, D.C.: January 2020).

**Figure 2: Projected Net Interest and Other Spending as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product**



Source: GAO. | GAO-20-482T

**Accessible Data for Figure 2: Projected Net Interest and Other Spending as a Percentage of Gross Domestic Product**

Fiscal Year	Net interest as percentage of GDP	Discretionary spending as percentage of GDP	Medicare spending as percentage of GDP	Social Security spending as percentage of GDP
2019	1.77	6.30	3.17	4.89

Letter

Fiscal Year	Net interest as percentage of GDP	Discretionary spending as percentage of GDP	Medicare spending as percentage of GDP	Social Security spending as percentage of GDP
2020	1.73	6.36	3.21	4.95
2021	1.72	6.27	3.32	5.03
2022	1.78	6.24	3.44	5.14
2023	1.91	6.12	3.55	5.27
2024	2.02	6.02	3.65	5.39
2025	2.13	5.98	3.76	5.51
2026	2.23	5.90	3.85	5.62
2027	2.34	5.83	3.98	5.73
2028	2.47	5.76	4.16	5.83
2029	2.58	5.65	4.33	5.93
2030	2.70	5.59	4.38	6.02
2031	2.87	5.74	4.48	6.01
2032	3.05	5.88	4.57	6.00
2033	3.24	6.03	4.66	5.99
2034	3.45	6.17	4.75	5.98
2035	3.67	6.32	4.83	5.97
2036	3.91	6.46	4.92	5.96
2037	4.17	6.61	4.99	5.95
2038	4.44	6.75	5.05	5.94
2039	4.73	6.90	5.10	5.93
2040	5.04	7.04	5.15	5.93
2041	5.24	7.19	5.20	5.92
2042	5.44	7.19	5.24	5.91
2043	5.79	7.19	5.27	5.90
2044	5.99	7.19	5.31	5.88
2045	6.20	7.19	5.36	5.87
2046	6.41	7.19	5.40	5.85
2047	6.80	7.19	5.44	5.84
2048	7.02	7.19	5.48	5.82
2049	7.25	7.19	5.51	5.81
2050	7.47	7.19	5.55	5.81
2051	7.70	7.19	5.59	5.80
2052	7.93	7.19	5.63	5.80
2053	8.16	7.19	5.66	5.80
2054	8.40	7.19	5.70	5.81
2055	8.63	7.19	5.75	5.82

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Letter

Fiscal Year	Net interest as percentage of GDP	Discretionary spending as percentage of GDP	Medicare spending as percentage of GDP	Social Security spending as percentage of GDP
2056	8.88	7.19	5.80	5.83
2057	9.13	7.19	5.85	5.84
2058	9.38	7.19	5.89	5.85
2059	9.63	7.19	5.94	5.87
2060	9.89	7.19	5.99	5.89
2061	10.15	7.19	6.04	5.90
2062	10.41	7.19	6.08	5.92
2063	10.68	7.19	6.13	5.93
2064	10.95	7.19	6.19	5.95
2065	11.22	7.19	6.24	5.97
2066	11.49	7.19	6.29	5.98
2067	11.77	7.19	6.35	6.00
2068	12.05	7.19	6.41	6.02
2069	12.34	7.19	6.47	6.04
2070	12.62	7.19	6.53	6.05
2071	12.91	7.19	6.59	6.07
2072	13.21	7.19	6.65	6.08
2073	13.50	7.19	6.70	6.10
2074	13.80	7.19	6.76	6.11
2075	14.11	7.19	6.82	6.12
2076	14.40	7.19	6.88	6.12
2077	14.69	7.19	6.92	6.12
2078	14.99	7.19	6.97	6.12
2079	15.29	7.19	7.01	6.11
2080	15.58	7.19	7.05	6.10
2081	15.88	7.19	7.09	6.09
2082	16.19	7.19	7.14	6.08
2083	16.49	7.19	7.17	6.07
2084	16.79	7.19	7.20	6.06
2085	17.09	7.19	7.24	6.04
2086	17.40	7.19	7.27	6.03
2087	17.71	7.19	7.30	6.02
2088	18.03	7.19	7.34	6.02
2089	18.35	7.19	7.39	6.02
2090	18.68	7.19	7.43	6.02
2091	19.01	7.19	7.47	6.03

Fiscal Year	Net interest as percentage of GDP	Discretionary spending as percentage of GDP	Medicare spending as percentage of GDP	Social Security spending as percentage of GDP
2092	19.34	7.19	7.52	6.03
2093	19.68	7.19	7.56	6.05

Category of Spending	Year
Medicare	2041
Social Security	2044
Discretionary spending (Defense & Nondefense)	2049

Source: GAO. | GAO-20-482T

Interest costs will also depend in part on the outstanding mix of Treasury securities. The Department of the Treasury issues securities in a wide range of maturities to appeal to a broad range of investors to support its goal of borrowing at the lowest cost over time.<sup>3</sup> Treasury refinances maturing debt by issuing new debt in its place at the prevailing interest rate. At the end of fiscal year 2019, 61 percent of the outstanding amount of marketable Treasury securities held by the public (about \$9.9 trillion) was scheduled to mature in the next 4 years.<sup>4</sup> If interest rates are higher, Treasury will have to refinance these securities at the higher interest rates, adding to the interest costs of the growing federal debt.

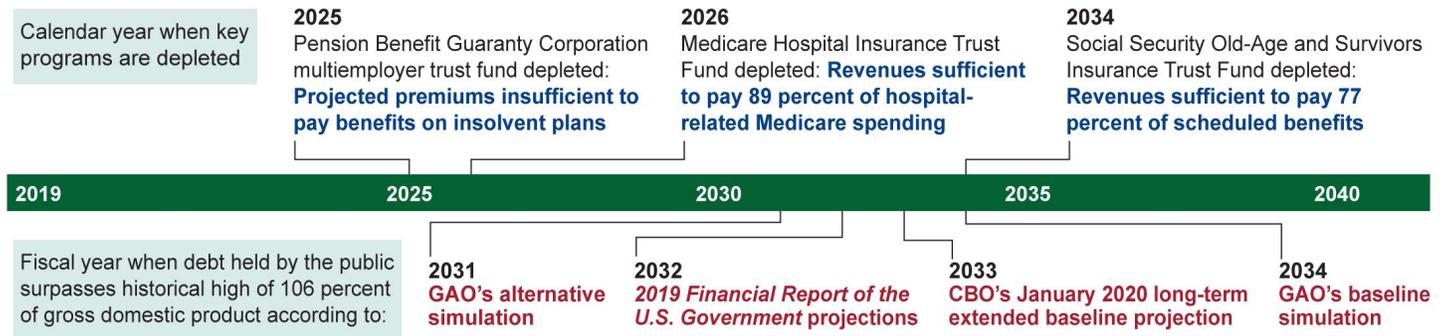
## Action Is Needed to Address an Unsustainable Fiscal Path

Impending financial challenges for major programs and fiscal risks are both straining the federal budget and contributing to the growing debt. Sustaining key programs will require changes (see fig. 3).

<sup>3</sup>The interest rates associated with the range of maturities of the nominal securities issued by Treasury create a “yield curve” which represents the relationship between the maturity of an asset and its yield (the interest rate paid by Treasury or cost of borrowing).

<sup>4</sup>Marketable securities are securities that can be resold by whomever owns them. At the end of fiscal year 2019, 97 percent of the outstanding amount of securities that constitute debt held by the public was marketable. For more information, see GAO, *Financial Audit: Bureau of the Fiscal Service’s Fiscal Years 2019 and 2018 Schedules of Federal Debt*, [GAO-20-117](#) (Washington, D.C.: Nov. 8, 2019).

**Figure 3: Key Dates for Major Programs and Future Debt**



Sources: Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, Trustees for Social Security and Medicare, Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, GAO, and 2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government. | GAO-20-482T

**Accessible Data for Figure 3: Key Dates for Major Programs and Future Debt**

Calendar year when key programs are depleted	Calendar year information
2025	2025 Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation multiemployer trust fund depleted: Projected premiums insufficient to pay benefits on insolvent plans
2026	Medicare Hospital Insurance Trust Fund depleted: Revenues sufficient to pay 89 percent of hospital-related Medicare spending
2034	Social Security Old-Age and Survivors Insurance Trust Fund depleted: Revenues sufficient to pay 77 percent of scheduled benefits

Fiscal year when debt held by the public surpasses historical high of 106 percent of gross domestic product according to:	Fiscal year information
2031	GAO's alternative simulation
2032	2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government projections
2033	CBO's January 2020 long-term extended baseline projection
2034	GAO's baseline simulation

Sources: Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation, Trustees for Social Security and Medicare, Congressional Budget Office (CBO), Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, GAO, and 2019 Financial Report of the U.S. Government. | GAO-20-482T

Note: In December 2019, the enactment of the Bipartisan American Miners Act of 2019 provided additional funding for future annual Treasury transfers to the 1974 United Mine Workers of America Pension Plan (included in the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation's multiemployer program). The Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation is currently assessing the effect of the legislation on the multiemployer program's estimated insolvency date.

The President's Budget, CBO, and the Chair of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System all make it clear that rising federal debt could have long-term consequences for the economy. For example it could:

- constrain Congress's ability to support the economy or address other national priorities,
- restrain private investment and thereby reduce productivity and overall growth, and
- erode confidence in the U.S. dollar.

In addition, it may increase the risk of a fiscal crisis, in which investors would lose confidence in the U.S. government's financial position, and interest rates on Treasury securities would increase abruptly.

To change the long-term fiscal path, policymakers will need to consider policy changes to the entire range of federal activities, both revenue (including tax expenditures) and spending (entitlement programs, other mandatory spending, and discretionary spending).<sup>5</sup> As Congress considers changes in revenue and spending policies to improve the federal government's long-term fiscal path, it will also need to consider other approaches for managing the level of debt.

As currently structured, the debt limit is a legal limit on the total amount of federal debt that can be outstanding at one time. The debt limit does not restrict Congress's ability to pass spending and revenue legislation that affects the level of debt, nor does it otherwise constrain fiscal policy. Without legislation to suspend or raise the debt limit, Treasury cannot continue issuing debt to finance the decisions already enacted by Congress and the President.<sup>6</sup> We have reported on the negative impacts

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<sup>5</sup>Tax expenditures are provisions of the tax code that reduce taxpayers' tax liability and therefore the amount of tax revenue paid to the government. Examples include tax credits, deductions, exclusions, exemptions, deferrals, and preferential tax rates.

<sup>6</sup>The Bipartisan Budget Act of 2019 has suspended the debt limit through July 31, 2021. Pub. L. No. 116-37, § 301, 133 Stat. 1049, 1057 (2019).

of uncertainty around the debt limit which include (1) increased Treasury borrowing costs, (2) decreased demand for Treasury securities, and (3) constrained Treasury cash management.<sup>7</sup> We have reported numerous times that the full faith and credit of the United States must be preserved.

We have also recommended that Congress consider other approaches to the current debt limit to avoid seriously disrupting the Treasury market and increasing borrowing costs and to allow it to better manage the federal government's level of debt. A number of bills have been introduced in this Congress to address this issue. The Senate Budget Committee's proposal to reform the Congressional budget process would automatically adjust the debt limit to conform to levels established in the budget resolution.

In contrast to the debt limit, fiscal rules can support efforts to achieve fiscal sustainability by imposing numerical limits or targets on the budget to guide fiscal policy. Fiscal rules are intended to influence decisions about spending and revenue as they are made.<sup>8</sup>

The Senate Budget Committee's proposal to reform the Congressional budget process is an example of one such approach. This legislation would specify target ratios for debt as a share of GDP and track legislation against that target. As Congress continues to consider options, two key points should be emphasized.

- An agreed-upon goal can help policymakers justify and frame their choices. With that in mind, a fiscal target that establishes a common goal for controlling the size of the federal debt relative to the economy—as well as well-designed rules that put the federal government on a path to achieve that target—could form part of a long-term fiscal plan to put the government on a sustainable fiscal path.
- The longer action is delayed, the greater and more drastic the changes will have to be, placing an additional burden on future generations.

While changes in spending and revenue to ensure long-term fiscal sustainability require legislative actions to alter fiscal policies, executive agencies can also take actions to contribute toward a sustainable fiscal

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<sup>7</sup>GAO, *Debt Limit: Market Response to Recent Impasses Underscores Need to Consider Alternative Approaches* [GAO-15-476](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 9, 2015).

<sup>8</sup>At the request of the Chairman of the Senate Budget Committee and Ranking Member of the House Budget Committee, we are examining the design, implementation, and enforcement of fiscal rules and targets in other countries.

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future. Although executive actions alone cannot put the U.S. government on a sustainable fiscal path, it is important for agencies to act as stewards of federal resources. These actions include reducing improper payments, which agencies estimate totaled \$175 billion in fiscal year 2019; addressing the \$381 billion annual net tax gap; better managing fragmentation, overlap, and duplication across the federal government; and improving information on federal programs and fiscal operations to aid agency decision-making.

Chairman Enzi, Ranking Member Sanders, and Members of the Committee, this completes our prepared statement. We would be pleased to respond to any questions that you may have.

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## GAO Contacts

For further information on this testimony, please contact Susan J. Irving, Senior Advisor to the Comptroller General, Debt and Fiscal Issues, who may be reached at (202) 512-6806 or [IrvingS@gao.gov](mailto:IrvingS@gao.gov); Robert F. Dacey, Chief Accountant, who may be reached at (202) 512-3406 or [daceyr@gao.gov](mailto:daceyr@gao.gov); or Dawn B. Simpson, Director, Financial Management and Assurance, who may be reached at (202) 512-3406 or [simpsondb@gao.gov](mailto:simpsondb@gao.gov). Contact points for our Congressional Relations and Public Affairs offices may be found on the last page of this statement.

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Washington, DC 20548

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## Public Affairs

Chuck Young, Managing Director, [youngc1@gao.gov](mailto:youngc1@gao.gov), (202) 512-4800  
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7149  
Washington, DC 20548

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## Strategic Planning and External Liaison

James-Christian Blockwood, Managing Director, [spel@gao.gov](mailto:spel@gao.gov), (202) 512-4707  
U.S. Government Accountability Office, 441 G Street NW, Room 7814,  
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