

CRS Report for Congress

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Interest Payments on the Federal Debt: A Primer

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Summary

Of the three broad categories of federal spending, the only category that cannot be reduced by legislative action is net interest payments. Net interest payments accounted for about 7% of federal spending between 1962 and the late 1970s. With the high interest rates in the late 1970s and the large budget deficits in the 1980s, net interest payments eventually rose to 15% of federal spending. The low interest rates combined with budget discipline in the 1990s reduced net interest payments back down to 7% of federal outlays by 2003. However, net interest payments have recently increased and are projected to continue increasing in the near-term. This report will be updated annually.

Federal spending is divided into three broad categories. First, discretionary spending is provided and controlled by the annual appropriations acts and includes such things as defense and education spending.¹ Discretionary spending currently accounts for about 40% of federal outlays. Second, direct or mandatory spending is provided and controlled by laws other than appropriation acts and includes spending for such programs as Social Security and Medicare.² Mandatory spending accounts for over half of federal outlays. Lastly, net interest payments are interest payments on federal debt held by the public and currently account for almost 7% of federal outlays.

In an effort to reduce spending, the FY2006 budget resolution (H.Con.Res. 95) included reconciliation instructions to reduce mandatory spending by \$35 billion over the next five years. Congress ultimately voted to reduce mandatory spending by about \$40 billion over five years. In addition, Congress enacted a 1% across-the-board reduction in FY2006 discretionary spending. The only category of federal spending that cannot be reduced by legislative action (barring default on the public debt) is net interest payments.

¹ For more information on discretionary spending see CRS Report RS22128, *Discretionary Spending: Prospects and History*, by Philip D. Winters.

² For more information on mandatory spending see CRS Report RL33074, *Mandatory Spending: Evolution and Growth Since 1962*, by Thomas L. Hungerford.

While Congress cannot affect current net interest payments, congressional actions on the budget will affect future interest payments. This report examines net interest payments and the mechanisms through which Congress can affect net interest payments.

Federal Debt

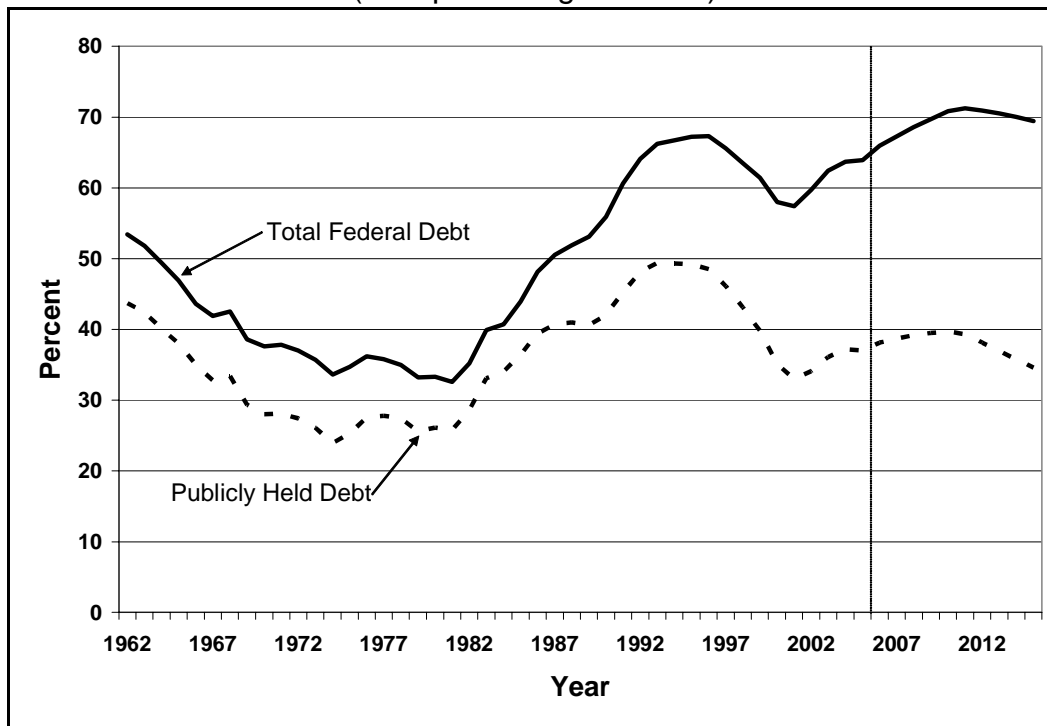
Federal debt is composed of debt issued by the Treasury (Treasury securities) and debt securities issued by other federal agencies (agency securities). At the end of FY2005, total federal securities amounted to \$7.9 trillion, of which only \$23.6 billion (0.3%) were agency securities. Federal debt is held either by the public (that is, private investors) or in government accounts. Currently, about 42% of federal debt is held in various government accounts. For example, the two Social Security trust funds currently hold over \$1.8 trillion in Treasury securities. The rest of the federal debt is held by the public (foreign and domestic), including individuals, pension funds, banks, and other investors.

Figure 1 shows the level of total federal debt and debt held by the public since 1962 as a percentage of gross domestic product (GDP). Both measures of debt fell as a proportion of GDP between 1962 and the mid-1970s. Beginning in 1981, total federal debt began to climb as tax cuts, increases in defense spending, and a recession increased budget deficits. Total debt continued growing relative to GDP until the mid-1990s. As budget deficits gave way to budget surpluses after 1997, and as the economy expanded, federal debt fell as a percentage of GDP. The mild recession and the tax cuts in 2001 moved the federal budget back into deficit and federal debt consequently increased.

Between 1962 and 1982, total federal debt and debt held by the public followed roughly parallel trends. After the mid-1980s, however, trends in total federal debt and debt held by the public began to diverge. This was mainly due to changes in the Social Security program enacted in 1983 which increased revenues and reduced the growth in benefit payments. As a result, the Social Security program began to run surpluses (surplus monies are invested in Treasury securities), increasing the share of federal debt held in government accounts. The Congressional Budget Office's (CBO) baseline projection indicates that total federal debt and debt held by the public will continue to diverge over the next 10 years.³

³ CBO's baseline projection starts with Congress's most recent budgetary decisions and then assumes that no policy changes will be made over the projection period. For entitlement programs CBO assumes that current laws will continue unchanged and by law assumes that discretionary spending will grow at the rate of inflation throughout the projection period. For revenues, CBO assumes that the provisions in the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts will expire on schedule, and that more individuals will be subject to the alternative minimum tax (AMT). CBO's baseline is not intended to be a prediction of future budgetary outcomes. President Bush and the Republican congressional leadership have proposed making the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts permanent, and addressing the AMT. Consequently, future federal revenues could be considerably lower than CBO's baseline projection. See CBO, *The Long-term Budget Outlook*, Dec. 2005.

**Figure 1. Total U.S. Federal Debt and Debt Held by the Public,
FY1962-FY2015**
(as a percentage of GDP)



Source: OMB and CBO.

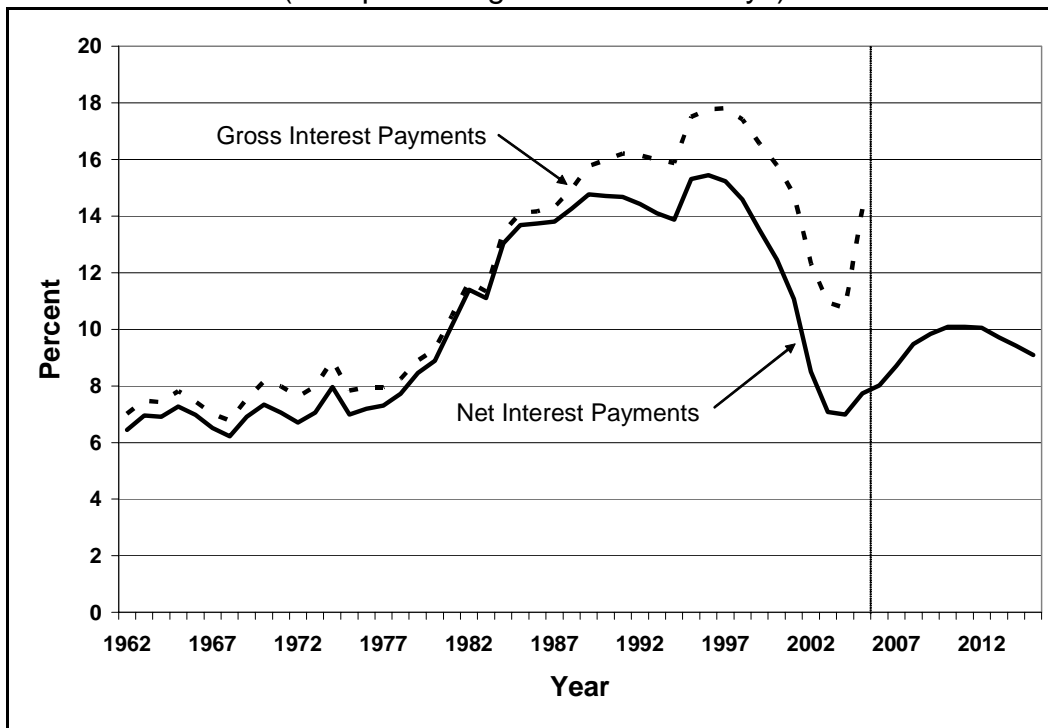
Interest Payments on the Federal Debt

In FY2005, total or gross interest on Treasury debt securities amounted to \$352.4 billion — about 14% of federal outlays. However, not all of this flowed from the Treasury to the public — \$161 billion was credited to government accounts such as the Social Security trust funds. The interest payments on the Treasury securities held in government accounts do not represent funds or real resources available for spending. Rather these interest payments are merely a bookkeeping entry transferring funds from one government account to another.⁴

The upper line in **Figure 2** shows the evolution of gross interest payments since 1962. Gross interest payments remained at about 7% to 8% of outlays until the late 1970s. After 1978, interest payments rapidly increased to reach almost 18% of outlays by 1997. After 1997, gross interest payments fell as a percentage of outlays as interest rates fell and the federal budget moved from deficit to surplus. When federal budget deficits reappeared in 2002, gross interest payments began rising.

⁴ In essence, the interest payments are used to purchase more Treasury securities. While not representing real resources available for current spending, the government will eventually have to find real resources (by raising taxes or reducing spending) for the redemption of these securities, under current law.

**Figure 2. Gross and Net Interest on Treasury Debt Securities,
FY1962-FY2015**
(as a percentage of federal outlays)



Source: OMB and CBO.

Net interest payments are the component of gross interest payments that involves a transfer of funds or real resources from the government to the public. The lower line in **Figure 2** shows the evolution of net interest payments since 1962. For the most part, net interest payments followed the same basic trend as gross interest payments. However, the gap between gross and net interest payments widened after the mid-1980s.⁵ As with gross interest payments, net interest payments fell as a percentage of federal outlays when federal debt declined in the late-1990s. Net interest payments began to increase in 2004 and CBO projects they will continue rising for at least the next five years, and, under plausible scenarios, could continue rising indefinitely.⁶

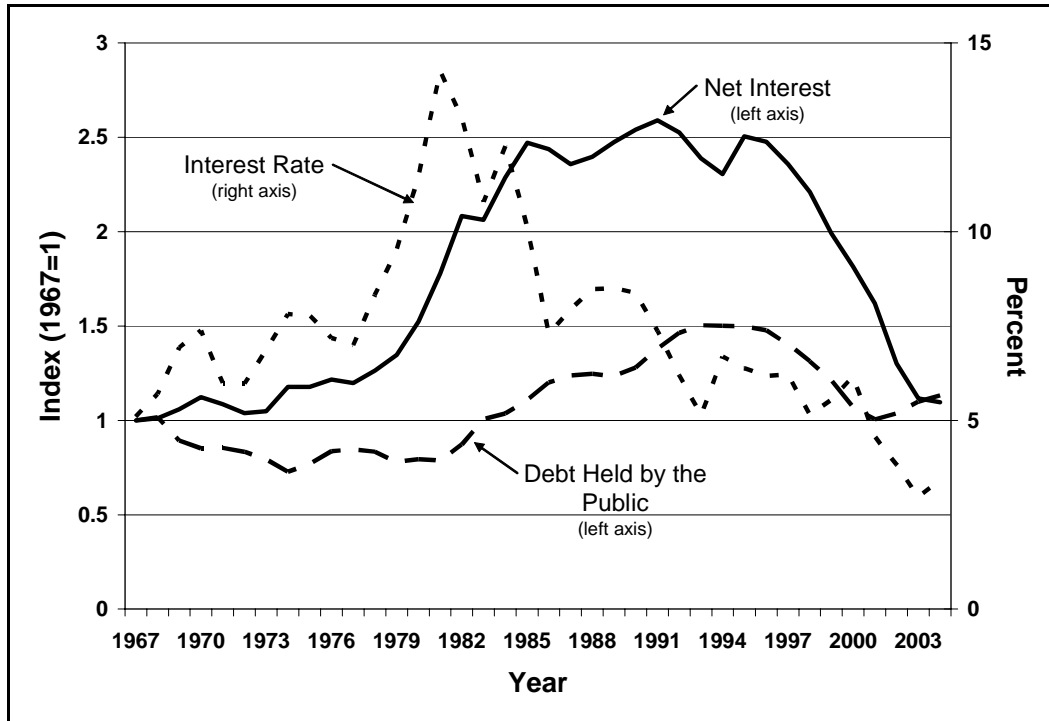
⁵ The widening of this gap is due, in part, to the increases in the Social Security trust fund resulting from the 1983 amendments to the Social Security Act. These amendments led to increasing revenues to the Social Security program, and reduced the growth in benefits.

⁶ See CBO, *The Long-term Budget Outlook*, Dec. 2005.

Determinants of Net Interest Payments

The primary determinants of net interest payments are (1) the interest rate or yield on U.S. Treasury securities, and (2) the level of debt held by the public. **Figure 3** shows the evolution of net interest payments, debt held by the public, and the interest rate since 1967. The interest rate is the yield on five-year constant maturity U.S. Treasury bonds. Both net interest payments and debt held by the public are expressed as a percentage of GDP, and are indexed so that the value in 1967 is equal to one.⁷

Figure 3. Interest Rate, Net Interest Payments, and Debt Held by the Public, FY1967-2004



Source: OMB and Federal Reserve Board.

Net interest payments increased rapidly beginning in 1977 at about the same time that interest rates increased dramatically (see **Figure 3**). Net interest payments continued to increase after interest rates fell in the early 1980s because of the increase in debt held by the public. The increase in debt held by the public was due to the large budget deficits in the first years of the Reagan Administration and counteracted the effect of falling interest rates on net interest payments. As both interest rates and debt held by the public fell after 1997, net interest payments fell as a proportion of federal outlays.

The government can, to some extent, control the effective interest rate paid on its debt by varying the maturity of its securities. The federal government issues both short-term and long-term debt. The yield on Treasury securities varies with the maturity of the

⁷ The index is created by dividing the value in each year by the value in 1967. This is done so that both series fit on the same graph.

securities. Typically, short-term securities have a lower yield than longer-term securities, and the yield curve, therefore, is upward sloping.⁸ Occasionally, the yield curve will invert with longer-term securities having a lower yield than short-term securities, but this happens neither often nor for extended periods.

A primary goal of debt management is to obtain the lowest borrowing cost over time. Over the past 30 years, the mean maturity of marketable Treasury securities held by private investors has varied between about three years and six years. Since 2000, the range has narrowed to between five and six years. However, this apparent stability masks changes in the types of securities issued. In 2001, for example, the Treasury stopped issuing 30-year bonds.⁹ Although shorter-term Treasury securities tend to have lower yields than longer-term securities, they also are more volatile. Consequently, the financing costs of short-term securities can change dramatically over fairly short periods. This volatility and uncertainty complicate efforts to obtain the lowest borrowing costs over time.

Congressional actions affecting the budget deficit will affect federal debt, which, in turn, affects future net interest payments. Budget deficits and federal debt can also affect the interest rates on Treasury securities.¹⁰ Increasing federal debt will increase the supply of Treasury securities. This will tend to push down the price and increase the yield of these securities.¹¹ Recent studies have estimated that increasing debt held by the public by one percent of GDP will increase future interest rates by two to six basis points (0.02 to 0.06 percentage points).¹² Thus budget deficits increase federal debt and future interest rates, which in turn increase future net interest payments.

⁸ The yield curve is the relationship of the yield on securities and the maturity of those securities.

⁹ Treasury plans to issue 30-year bonds again beginning in February 2006.

¹⁰ The strength of the economy, inflation expectations, and the actions of the Federal Reserve Board also have an important effect on interest rates.

¹¹ There is an inverse relationship between the price of a bond and the yield of the bond.

¹² See Eric Engen and R. Glenn Hubbard, *Federal Government Debts and Interest Rates*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper no. 10681, Aug. 2004; William G. Gale and Peter R. Orszag, "Budget Deficits, National Saving, and Interest Rates," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, vol. 2004, no. 2 (2004), pp. 101-187; and Thomas Laubach, *New Evidence on the Interest Rate Effects of Budget Deficits and Debt*, Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Finance and Economics Discussion paper no. 2003-13, May 2003.