Q: Why is a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution needed?
A: Congress can vote to abandon plans put in place for spending restraint and history proves that, too often, Congress either unravels budget controls or never adopts them in the first place. A constitutional requirement for a balanced budget would compel members of Congress to act in a fiscally responsible way, since every member of Congress takes an oath to uphold the Constitution, and members tend to take the oath seriously. A majority of the Senate Judiciary Committee, which oversees constitutional issues, said this about a balanced budget amendment after passing one twice during the 1990s: "Flagrant disregard of the proposed amendment's clear and simple provisions would constitute nothing less than a betrayal of the public trust. In their campaigns for reelection, elected officials who flout their responsibilities under this amendment will find that the political process will provide the ultimate enforcement mechanism."

Q: How would a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution be put in place?
A: An amendment to the Constitution requires a two-thirds vote both in the Senate and the House of Representatives, as well as the approval of three-fourths of the 50 state legislatures. At least 46 states have requirements to balance their state budgets. Congress has voted on a balanced budget amendment several times, but there never have been enough votes to approve the amendment and send it to the states for ratification. Along with every other Republican senator, I am a co-sponsor of legislation that could establish a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. The last time the Senate voted on a balanced budget amendment was in March 1997, when the nation's debt was less than half of what it is today. The resolution failed by one vote. A balanced budget amendment passed the House of Representatives in 1995. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives must vote on a balanced budget amendment this year, sometime between October 1 and December 31, thanks to a requirement in the agreement that was reached to increase the federal debt ceiling.

Q: How would the balanced budget amendment work?
A: The legislation I've co-sponsored for a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution would require the President to submit a balanced budget to Congress annually. It would prohibit Congress from spending more than it takes in or spending more than 18 percent of gross domestic product, compared to the 24 percent that's being spent today. In addition, the proposal I support would require supermajorities in the House and Senate to raise taxes. With a federal debt of more than $14 trillion and deficits as far as the eye can see, it's time for Congress to act on a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution and then let states have their say.

Friday, August 5, 2011