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OP-EDS

A bipartisan approach to America's greatest fiscal challenge

By Sens. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) and Judd Gregg (R-N.H.)

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As senators from different political parties, it is true that we do not always agree on fiscal policy. But we do agree on this: Our nation will soon confront one of its greatest fiscal challenges, and it is our responsibility as elected leaders to work together today on a solution that will best serve American citizens and the long-term health of the economy.

Next year, a significant milestone will occur. The leading edge of the 70 million-strong baby boom generation will begin retiring, which will cause the cost of federal health and retirement programs to explode. Long-term projections show an unsustainable imbalance between government spending and revenues that simply cannot be corrected by economic growth alone.

Clearly, the American economy is confronting a very serious problem. Healthcare entitlements and Social Security alone will absorb an increasingly larger portion of the federal budget — 20 percent of GDP by 2034, equal to the entire federal government today — and there is not a contingency plan in place. As part of tackling our nation's long-term fiscal imbalance, Congress and the president must address the structure of programs serving the retired population in order to prevent the collapse of the federal benefit system under its own weight.

We believe the solution lies in a balanced, bipartisan approach. Therefore, we have come together to offer the Bipartisan Task Force for Responsible Fiscal Action Act. This task force, made up equally of Democrats and Republicans, will be charged with authoring bipartisan legislation to immediately begin addressing the nation's fiscal challenges. Everything will be on the table. This will not be another commission mulling over ideas that will be filed away, and it won't be under the control of one political party or the other. It is designed to produce legislative solutions that Congress must vote on, not just bury in political debate.

Here's how it will work: The bill establishes a 16-member task force that is comprised of four congressional members each chosen by the Senate majority leader and House Speaker; three congressional members each chosen by the Senate and House Minority Leaders; and two administration members, one chosen by the president and the other being the Secretary of the Treasury, who will serve as task force chairperson.

The task force will review all aspects of the current and long-term financial condition of the federal government. It will identify factors that jeopardize the government's long-term fiscal balance, or that create a gap between expected revenues and spending. It will analyze potential solutions, and make legislative recommendations to Congress and the president on how to substantially improve the long-term fiscal balance in a report due Dec. 9, 2008. To ensure the

bipartisanship of the recommendations, at least three-quarters of the task force, or 12 members, must agree to them before the report can be submitted.

Once Congress receives the recommendations as a legislative proposal, it must be fast-tracked to final consideration in both the Senate and House. Final passage of the bill requires a supermajority in each chamber — three-fifths of the Senate and three-fifths of the House.

Sound easy? Unfortunately, it won't be. The choices are difficult now, but the longer we wait, the harder they will become. The time for action is now. But change cannot be accomplished without both political parties being invested in the outcome, and helping their constituents to understand the problem and the impact of the solutions.

This task force — which is bipartisan in composition and requires supermajority support for its recommendations and supermajority support from Congress for any final legislation — is the right place to start. As elected officials, and as members of the baby boom generation ourselves, we believe the responsibility for action rests with the president and Congress today, and we hope that our colleagues will join us to ensure economic security for generations to come.

Conrad and Gregg are the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the Senate Budget Committee.

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