

U.S. Can Prevent Bankruptcy

By COKIE ROBERTS
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The budget outlook is truly dismal. The deficit for the current fiscal year could hit \$1.6 trillion, and experts project a tsunami of red ink for many years to come.

But there is a model for how to stop the country's headlong rush toward fiscal ruin. It's called BRAC, an acronym for Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission. That's typical Washington jargon, but it's also a rare bipartisan idea that actually worked.

In the late 1980s, the Pentagon found itself with a huge inventory of unneeded military bases. The obvious answer was to

close them. But every installation meant jobs and revenue for a local community, and every lawmaker representing one of those communities freaked out at the thought of losing federal dollars.

In a rare burst of self-knowledge, Congress realized it was too spineless to resist such protests. So in 1990, it passed a law creating a new procedure. The Pentagon would draw up a list of installations slated for closure; that list would be passed on to a BRAC, an independent, bipartisan commission appointed by the president.

The BRAC could revise the Pentagon's recommendations — and the lobbying at that point was furious — but once the panel approved a final hit list, Congress had to ratify or reject the entire package. No amendments, no horse-trading, no political maneuvering allowed.

The result: Close to 400 redundant installations were shuttered during five rounds of BRAC deliberations that ended

in 2005. The lesson: Take the same concept, and apply it to an even thornier political problem — the soaring budget deficit.

Normally, we would hate the idea of a commission that usurps the role of duly elected legislators. And many similar panels have tried and failed to force Congress to make unpopular decisions. But the legislative process has collapsed, and the price of inaction is too high. It's time to try a new approach.

A bipartisan group of senators recently proposed a BRAC-like body to recommend a new set of tax and spending policies. Fifty-three lawmakers voted yes, seven shy of the number needed to break a filibuster. Hardliners on both sides teamed up to kill the bill — and demonstrate, once again, why a commission is now so essential.

Anti-tax zealots opposed the idea because any feasible compromise would require significant revenue increases;

big-spending liberals yelped about the threat to social spending. Two conclusions are obvious: Both sides are wrong, and Congress cannot stand up to either one.

President Obama recognized this truth and turned to Plan B: a commission created by executive order, not law. He's appointed two superb public servants to head the effort — Democrat Erskine Bowles, chief of staff to President Clinton, and Alan Simpson, the former Republican senator from Wyoming. Their recommendations are due Dec. 1, and Congressional leaders have promised to follow the BRAC model and bring the measure to the floor for an up-or-down vote.

We are not naive; the chance that this process will produce significant and painful changes in budget policy remains small. But there was a flicker of encouragement this week when Rep. Steny Hoyer, the second-ranking Democrat in the House, delivered an important speech

strongly endorsing the commission concept.

"The real work of cutting deficits is so easy to demagogue that it rarely succeeds without support from both sides," he told the Brookings Institution, a progressive think tank. "That's one of the reasons why the fiscal commission must not take any option off the table, from raising revenues to cutting entitlement spending. And that's why both parties have a duty to appoint members who are willing to compromise and make tough decisions."

Hoyer advanced two "tough decisions" guaranteed to save money and alarm his liberal audience: Raise the retirement age and means-test benefits under Social Security and Medicare. Then he frightened conservatives by voicing a vicious truth: "No one likes raising revenue, and understandably so. But if you're going to buy, you need to pay."



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Thought for Today

"For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek. For the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him." Romans 10:12

Ethics Training Needed

Athens Banner-Herald

Say or think what you will about Republican Congressman Paul Broun, who represents this part of the state in Washington, D.C. but when he's right (as in "correct"), he's right (as in "correct").

Broun introduced House Bill 1111 on Wednesday. Not only is the House passing Broun's resolution, but it's doing so at a point that House members are not even supposed to be discussing it.

"Ignorance is not an excuse for an accused crime," said Broun. "The House has a duty to investigate the ethics of its members."

New York Democrat Rep. Charles Schumer was, as *The New York Times* reported, "one of the few House members who had been investigated by the House Ethics Committee in the past few weeks."

The ethics panel is still investigating the serious accusations regarding Rangel's fundraising, his failure to pay federal taxes on rental income from a villa he owns in the Dominican Republic, and his use of four rent-stabilized apartments provided by a Manhattan real estate developer."

Much closer to home, and within Broun's own political party, is the case of Georgia Republican U.S. Rep. Nathan Deal, who has announced that he will resign effective this coming Monday (today) to devote all of his time to running for governor of this state. He rearranged that resignation to take effect on Monday, the day after he was elected to the House, all stay in Congress until

his resignation is based on a quick vote on the floor. Deal is leaving the House on a technicality. He is not resigning. He is leaving the House on a technicality.

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School Reform Crucial For Nation's Future

By MORTON KONDRACKE
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Congress has a chance — a narrowing one, given the calendar — to prove it can do something important on a bipartisan basis: recommit the country to school reform.

Among all of President Barack Obama's priorities, this may have the longest-term significance, holding the key (along with reducing the nation's debt) to whether America can compete in the 21st century.

It has been nearly 30 years since the landmark "A Nation at Risk" report launched the education-reform movement and still, as Obama noted last month, American eighth-graders rank ninth in the world on international math tests and 11th in science.

A workforce report by the Business Roundtable warned that the United States is the only major industrialized country with a younger generation that has a lower level of high school achievement than the older generation and is second to last in college completion.

And, as Obama pointed out Monday, speaking to the America's Promise Alliance, a third of U.S. children fail to graduate from high school — including half of all minority children, condemning most of them to lives of poverty and creating a huge cost to society.

Congress and the Obama administration did get off to a fast start last year with \$100 billion in education aid to the states under the two-year economic stimulus package — half of which will be handed out on a competitive basis that demands significant education reform.

But health care and other priorities have delayed action on a long-term commitment in the form of reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and a rewrite of the Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act.

Obama wants to replace the NCLB's goal of having all students "proficient" in reading and math by 2014 with that of having them "college and career ready" by 2020 and having their performance benchmarked against a common international standard agreed to by all states.

Schools and teachers would be judged on the basis of student test scores, rewarded for progress and "held accountable" for failure by having schools reorganized or closed.

The reauthorization process is just getting started. It got its first hearing Wednesday before the House Education and Labor Committee but without any bill to work on.

The will seems to exist for bipartisan action. The question is: Is there time to get it done this year?

If not — and, given a short election-year calendar and the prospect of total Senate gridlock, not is likely — reform would have to proceed by executive-branch regulation and year-to-year appropriations.

Obama has inspired considerable optimism among school reformers that he's willing to take political

risks to push reform.

In the latest instance, at the America's Promise event, he referred favorably to the firing of all teachers at Central Falls High School in Rhode Island after only 7 percent of its 11th-graders passed the state's math test and teachers refused to work 25 extra minutes a day to help them improve.

That drew an accusation from the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, that Obama was scoring "political points by scapegoating teachers."

Of the two big teachers unions that are powers in the Democratic Party, the AFT has been formally supportive of Obama's efforts to tie teacher pay and promotion to improvements in children's test scores — the National Education Association has not — but her blast suggests that the unions will try to water down or kill reform.

Obama's Education secretary, Arne Duncan, has said he wants to work with the unions on Obama's "Race to the Top" for education, but in several states, the unions fought compliance with Duncan's requirements that states lift limits on charter schools and repeal laws forbidding teacher assessments tied to student performance.

One of those who pronounces himself "optimistic" about Obama's prospects is New York City's reformist schools Chancellor Joel Klein, who has battled continually with Weingarten.

Klein told me that, besides union efforts to influence Congress, Obama's challenges would be to "really hang tough" in demanding reform before distributing stimulus money and ensure that states actually implement changes called for in the new legislation.

"I think the strategy is terrific," he said, referring to the government's using billions in new money to incentivize reform.

But he said, "conceptualizing change is easy, but actually changing large and complex organizations becomes a real challenge — for example, using data to inform instruction, doing annual evaluation of teachers and having a person mediate improvement or impose real consequences, terminating unqualified teachers."

Pronouncing herself "cautiously optimistic" is President George W. Bush's reformist Education secretary, Margaret Spellings.

She told me that Obama should keep NCLB's 2014 goal of all-children-at-grade-level as a way station on the road to "college and career ready" by 2020.

"A lot of people have been grousing about the so-called rigorous targets of NCLB," she said, "but now they want to set higher standards but on a longer deadline so they can escape accountability."

She said that many states have repeatedly tried to loosen standards and soften consequences, and the unions succeeded in turning NCLB into a "toxic brand," despite improved test scores for minority children.