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## Fixing the Budget In the Worst (But Only) Way

By Fred Hiatt  
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No one would ever accuse of Rep. Frank Wolf of being slick. He is not, he would probably be the first to admit, especially eloquent. He doesn't get by on charisma.

But in the department of doggedness, nobody can outdo Wolf, a Republican who has represented parts of Northern Virginia for 28 years. For the past several years, what he has been most persistent about is the need for a bipartisan commission to stave off looming fiscal disaster. He introduces legislation, writes letters, makes calls. Above all he pleads his case: Nothing else is going to work.

For just as long, I've been reluctant to admit that Wolf might be right. There are two big problems with the type of commission he's proposing, which would present Congress with one take-it-or-leave-it grand solution. It can produce lowest-common-denominator-type answers. And it makes sense only if you're willing to admit that the regular political system cannot do what it is supposed to do. Which, lately, has been seeming like a safer and safer bet.

The model for the Wolf idea is the method Congress has used to close military bases since 1988. Recognizing that the Pentagon operated too many facilities but that no legislator would vote to close a base in his or her own district, Congress set up a Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission (BRAC), which came up with a rational downsizing plan. Congress had to vote for the whole list or nothing at all; there could be no special pleading.

That makes sense for questions of real estate, where philosophy and ideology don't come into play. You begin to see the dangers when you look at the findings of the 2006 Baker-Hamilton commission on Iraq, which Wolf also helped birth. To achieve its bipartisan consensus, it watered down its conclusions, picking a little from Column A and a little from Column B, to the point where had President George W. Bush accepted its recommendations, the United States almost certainly would have been defeated. Only the insistence of former Virginia senator Chuck Robb, a commission member, to leave open the possibility of a troop surge allowed Bush to fashion a strategy with a chance of success while still claiming to be following the advice of the Baker-Hamilton panel.

Now comes the movement to bring the rationale behind BRAC to the budget. Wolf's bill is co-sponsored by Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.); comparable legislation in the Senate is backed by the chairman and the ranking minority member of the Budget Committee, Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) and Judd Gregg (R-N.H.). The idea got a boost 10 days ago from another panel of Wise Men (and a couple of Wise Women) in a report called Saving America's Future.

"In light of the demonstrated inability of the existing political process" to address the country's fiscal problems, the panel said, Congress should create a Fiscal Future Commission modeled on, yes, BRAC. The authors include a former NATO ambassador, David Abshire; a former Lockheed Martin CEO, Norman Augustine; a Democratic former governor, Roy Romer; former attorney general Edwin Meese; former senators Sam Nunn and Chuck Hagel; and many more.

The idea makes most sense for something like saving Social Security, where there's a large consensus at the political center on what needs to be done (change the inflation index for benefits a bit, raise the age limit a bit, tax income at a slightly higher level) but no political will to do it. But the Fiscal Future

Commission would fix not only all entitlement programs but also "reorient government spending programs and tax preferences." And it would do so "free of the pressure and influence of interest groups and partisan elements."

The idea, in other words, is to take the very questions at the heart of politics -- what should government do and who should pay for it -- out of politics. This has to be abhorrent to anyone who believes in representative democracy. There's only one argument on the other side, really. Unfortunately, it's a strong one. You can find it on Page 10 of the Congressional Budget Office analysis of President Obama's budget plans. There you see that Obama proposes to spend, year after year, 23 or 24 percent of the national economy, while proposing to levy in revenue, year after year, only 18 or 19 percent. The result: the national debt, which is equal to 41 percent of the national economy today, will rise to 82 percent by the end of the next decade.

If this is what we can expect from the man who was elected on a promise of making "hard choices," then Frank Wolf's persistence should pay off. His proposed commission would represent the failure of our political system. But it's needed.

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