

OPINION

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Good-for-Nothing Commission

Heading toward disaster

BY DONALD KAUL

We have seen the future and it is grim.



That glimpse of the road ahead arrived in the form of a preview of the Bowles-Simpson Commission's report on the kinds of things government has to do (and not do) if we want to avoid economic doom.

Things like giving up tax breaks we never even knew were breaks, extending our working years to the cusp of senility, absorbing even higher gasoline taxes, accepting (if you're a government worker) a pay freeze and (if you're well-off) paying more into Social Security but taking out less.

Oh, it's going to be a fun time, the future is. I can hardly wait for it to get here.

Not.

The commission--officially named the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform--was created by President Obama to

find ways to avoid the 12-car wreck our economy is headed for. It's ostensibly a bipartisan group, meaning that it's made up of partisans on both sides of our political divide.

Its co-chairmen are Erskine Bowles, a Clinton apparatchik, and Alan Simpson, formerly a maverick Republican Senator from Wyoming--now just strange. Their report, a trial balloon designed to see where the shooting will come from when the full report comes out, is what we're talking about now.

As it turns out, the shooting will come from everywhere. The Democrats hate the cuts in programs. The Republicans are angry about the tax hikes. The military-industrial complex loathes the cuts in military spending. Farmers can't abide doing away with farm subsidies. Old people object to losing their Social Security cost of living increases, and the middle-aged are appalled at the thought of waiting until they're 69 to collect retirement benefits.

The good news is, I suppose, that none of the above has even a remote chance of being made into law. No sane politician would vote for any of that, unless he or she is

planning on an early retirement.

The American people have made it plain that they don't want draconian sacrifice; they don't want any sacrifice at all. They want all the benefits due them (plus 10 percent) and they want someone else to pay for it.

The bad news is that even if all of those things were done--all the cutting, all the taxing--it still wouldn't be enough to make the looming budget deficits go away.

That's because the plan doesn't seriously address the continuing explosion of health care costs, particularly for a rapidly aging population.

It assumes that politicians will slow the rise by "establishing a process to regularly evaluate cost growth" and taking "additional steps as needed."

Alan, Erskine...if they could do that, we wouldn't be in this mess in the first place.

As it is, the plan is a deeply conservative document. It cuts spending two dollars (some say three) for every dollar it asks in tax increases. And while some of the taxes fall on the wealthy, most (like

the reduction of mortgage interest deductibility) are aimed at the middle class.

In return, the plan would cut the upper income tax rate from 35 to 23 percent and corporate tax rates from 35 percent to as low as 26 percent.

Everybody likes lower taxes but that represents a shift from the not-so-rich to the rich and very rich.


So we'll blunder ahead. We'll do nothing, argue about everything, and slouch toward disaster.

The worst is what's happening to the states, which isn't dealt with in the Bowles-Simpson report. Their revenue sources are tapped out, so they're cutting to the bone and then cutting the bone. And the last slice comes from education budget.

You know, we can treat old people badly, we can deny the rich their second homes, we can leave farmers to their own devices, and we can limit ourselves to one war at a time. We can even (sob) let our national parks go to ruin.

But when we fail to educate our children, we maim the future.

If we have a future.
OtherWords columnist Donald Kaul lives in Ann Arbor, Mich.

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