

Cliff

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"We're going to be here New Year's Eve," retiring Sen. Joe Lieberman said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union," adding that it was likely the nation would go over the fiscal cliff.

Failing to meet the year-end deadline on striking a deal would amount to "the most colossal, consequential act of congressional irresponsibility in a long time," said Lieberman, an independent from Connecticut who caucuses with Democrats. "Maybe ever in American history, because of the impact it will have on almost every American."

However, Norquist called the situation part of a longer process.

"This is not a fight that begins and ends the first week of January," he said, predicting "a regular fight" when Congress needs to authorize more government spending and raise the federal debt ceiling in coming months.

"There the Republicans have a lot of clout because they can say we'll let you run the government for the next month, but you've got to make these reforms," he explained.

Obama spoke separately Friday with Boehner and Reid to try to salvage a fiscal cliff deal by the end of year, then delivered a previously unscheduled statement to reporters at the White House.

He acknowledged what has become obvious: The broader deficit reduction deal he seeks will probably come in stages, rather than in the so-called grand bargain he and Boehner have been trying to negotiate.

In particular, Obama called for Congress to come back after Christmas and work with him on a limited agreement to prevent tax hikes on the middle class, extend unemployment insurance and set a framework for future deficit reduction steps.

Boehner's spokesman said the speaker will be "ready to find a solution that can pass both houses of Congress" when he returns to Washington, as now planned for Thursday.

The GOP opposition to any kind of tax rate increase has stalled deficit negotiations for two years and led to unusual political drama, such as McConnell recently filibustering a proposal he introduced and Thursday night's rebuff by House Republicans of

an alternative tax plan pushed by Boehner, their leader.

Boehner said at a news conference Friday that his Republican colleagues refused to back his plan, which would have extended all tax cuts except for income of more than \$1 million, because of fears of being blamed for a tax increase.

The negotiations with Obama on a broad deficit reduction agreement hit an impasse last week when both sides offered their "bottom line" positions, Boehner said. In what was considered as progress just a week ago, the president and speaker made major concessions but remained a few hundred billion dollars apart.

Reid and other Senate Democrats say House Republicans must accept that agreement will require support from legislators in both parties. He insisted that the Senate-passed plan with Obama's \$250,000 threshold, which polls show is strongly supported by the public, would pass the House if Boehner would allow a vote.

Some House Republicans have said they would join Democrats in supporting the president's proposal in hopes of moving past the volatile issue to focus on the spending cuts and entitlement reforms they seek.

The possibility of a fiscal cliff was set in motion over the past two years as a way to force action on mounting government debt.

Now, legislators risk looking politically cynical by seeking to weaken the measures enacted to try to force them to confront tough questions regarding deficit reduction, such as reforms to popular entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Polling has consistently shown most Americans back the president, who insists wealthy Americans must pay more, rather than Boehner and his Republican colleagues, who have balked at tax rate hikes and demanded spending cuts and entitlement program reforms.

A new CNN/ORC International survey last week found that just over half of respondents believe Republicans should give up more in any solution and consider the party's policies too extreme.

The two sides seemingly had made progress early last week on forging a \$2 trillion deficit reduction deal that included new revenue sought by Obama and spending cuts and entitlement changes desired by Boehner.

The president's latest offer set \$400,000

as the income threshold for a tax rate increase, up from his original plan of \$250,000. It also included a new formula for the consumer price index applied to some entitlement benefits, much to the chagrin of liberals.

Called chained CPI, the new formula includes assumptions on consumer habits in response to rising prices, such as seeking cheaper alternatives, and would result in smaller benefit increases in future years.

Statistics supplied by opponents say the change would mean Social Security recipients would get \$6,000 less in benefits over the first 15 years of chained CPI.

Liberal groups sought to mount a pressure campaign against including the chained CPI after news emerged this week that Obama was willing to include it, calling the plan a betrayal of senior citizens who had contributed throughout their lives for their benefits.

On CNN's "State of the Union," Sen. Joe Lieberman said prospects were poor for the possibility of a debt-reduction deal by midnight on December 31. The retiring senator predicted Sunday that Washington would be bustling with negotiations as the clock ticks toward 2013.

"We're going to be here New Year's Eve," Lieberman said. "In the aftermath of House Republicans rejecting Speaker (John) Boehner's so-called Plan B, it's the first time I feel it's more likely that we'll go over the cliff than not," he said, referring to the failed attempt by the GOP leader to extend tax breaks for Americans making under \$1 million. Boehner, sensing he lacked enough support from House Republicans, scrapped a vote on the measure Thursday night.

Explaining the Plan B breakdown Sunday, Rep.

Mick Mulvaney, a Republican from South Carolina, said GOP members were wary of voting on a measure that stood no chance of passing the Senate and being signed by President Barack Obama.

He also pushed back on suggestions the episode reflected a failure of leadership from Boehner, pointing to broad opposition to the Plan B measure from both moderate and conservative Republicans.

"This was not a fight that divided conservatives and moderates within the party," Mulvaney said, also on "State of the Union." "This was a legislation-specific vote and not a vote on leadership."

Lieberman told CNN chief political correspondent Candy Crowley on Sunday that failing to meet the year-end deadline on striking a deal would amount to "the most colossal, consequential act of congressional irresponsibility in a long time."

"Maybe ever in American history, because of the impact it will have on almost every American," he said.

The remaining option, Lieberman said, is a smaller deal brokered in the Senate to stave off large across-the-board spending cuts set to be enacted at the beginning of next year.

"I've talked to a lot of Republican colleagues in the Senate who are favorably inclined toward the idea to protect the middle class from the tax cuts," he said. "Let's raise taxes on people over \$250,000, and let's stop those terrible cuts in defense, homeland security, education."

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