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# WASHINGTON POST COLUMNIST DAVID BRODER PRAISES LONG-TERM REFORM COMMISSION

A Can't-Miss Event for the Next President

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By David S. Broder

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If I had the power to summon all 16 of the people running for president to be in one place, I would want them in a Senate hearing room for a session that is taking place tomorrow morning.

The hearing has been arranged by Kent Conrad of North Dakota, the Democratic chairman of the Budget Committee, and Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, the Republican ranking member.

They have invited David Walker, the comptroller general of the United States and the head of the Government Accountability Office, an arm of Congress; William Novelli, the head of AARP, the senior citizens lobby; Rep. Steny Hoyer of Maryland, the House majority leader; and Leon Panetta, the former White House chief of staff, budget director and former congressman.

What brings all these worthies together is an effort to revive the idea of a bipartisan effort to head off the bankrupting of America by runaway entitlement programs.

They and others, including Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson, clearly see that unless ways are found to reform the financing and benefits of Social Security and Medicare, the demands imposed by the retirement of millions of baby boomers will consume the federal budget and blight the prospects of the next generations.

Because neither party can solve this problem by itself, Conrad and Gregg have proposed the creation of a bipartisan task force, whose recommendations to the president and Congress chosen next November would be guaranteed to receive quick consideration.

The idea was greeted favorably by leaders of both parties in the Senate, and Paulson found support for it in the White House. But it has encountered

criticism from the opposing flanks. Vice President Cheney objected publicly to any consideration of tax increases, and Speaker Nancy Pelosi threw cold water on the idea. Apparently, she does not trust the administration to deal fairly, or she may want the Social Security issue saved for Democrats in the coming campaign.

So Conrad and Gregg backed off and decided to begin again -- making the case, through expert testimony, that a policy of inaction, looking the other way, is dangerous to the country's fiscal health.

As Gregg has noted, the first of the baby boomers filed for Social Security benefits this year -- and millions more will soon follow. By most official estimates, by 2034 Medicare and Social Security will eat up 20 percent of the gross domestic product -- equivalent to the entire federal budget of today.

To Gregg, that flashes a clear warning that "the next president, if he or she serves eight years, will find themselves in very dangerous waters. There is no way to support this system as it is constituted."

Conrad, who says he inherited a fear of debt from his Depression-era ancestors in North Dakota, said he laments that the government has added \$500 billion to the national debt this year, just as those boomers are starting to retire. "You see the dollar going down, and interest rates going up," he said. "And there's more to come."

Neither man expects a quick fix -- but both insist that delay is the most costly and wasteful strategy. The task force idea that they developed during a congressional trip to South America this past winter is an effort to assure all parties a voice -- and a fair process.

It would have 16 members, equally balanced between Republicans and Democrats. Fourteen would be members of Congress, chosen by the leadership and presumably representing the major economic policy committees. Two would be from the administration, with one of them, the secretary of Treasury, serving as chairman.

It would take 12 of the 16 votes to submit a report -- guaranteeing each party a voice in the outcome. And the report would be translated into bill form and given a fast track to a final vote in both the House and Senate, with a requirement of 60 percent support for it to go to the president -- again, protection for the minority.

A similar proposal has been introduced in the House by Republican Rep. Frank Wolf of Virginia and Democratic Rep. Jim Cooper of Tennessee.

Despite all these safeguards, neither Cheney nor Pelosi is satisfied, and without their backing, prospects seem dim. But the issue will haunt the next president -- unless at least the first steps to deal with it are taken now.

That is why those candidates ought to be at this hearing.

davidbroder@washpost.com