

# Deficit Hawk Returns, Much to His Party's Dismay

By JACKIE CALMES

WASHINGTON — Former Senator [Alan K. Simpson](#), the co-chairman of [President Obama's](#) bipartisan commission for reducing the mounting federal debt, figures that with the country in danger of “going to the bow-wows,” he has bigger things to worry about than whether “Rush Babe” and other conservative critics are “babbling into the vapors” that he is not Republican enough for the job.

That is Simpson-speak, recognizable to anyone familiar with Mr. Simpson's way of treating serious issues with folksy phrases and sometimes stinging humor during 18 years as a senator from Wyoming. But this is no joke: The [Republican Party's](#) insistence that no real Republican would even consider raising taxes is a big reason that many people believe the president's panel will never agree by December on a bipartisan multiyear plan to narrow the growing gap between spending and revenues.

“Alan Simpson's a great guy, but he's not going to bring along Republican votes on Capitol Hill,” said Vin Weber, a former congressman from Minnesota who was part of a younger generation of Reagan-era tax-cutters. “He's always been a Republican that would be willing to raise taxes, but that's not where today's Republican Party is.”

That is likely all the more true of the Republican Party in an election year, especially when it is courting the zealously antitax, small-government Tea Party voters. Still, it is a measure of the building concern about the nation's fiscal future that some Republicans outside Congress are beginning to challenge the party's antitax orthodoxy.

Many in the [Democratic Party](#) are as adamant in opposing reductions in [Medicare](#) and [Medicaid](#) — the programs that will do the most to drive the deficit ever higher in coming years — as most Republicans are in ruling out tax increases. Yet led by the White House, Democrats appear open to some future cost-cutting — if it is balanced with tax increases to minimize the pain of the spending reduction.

And on the Republican side some conservative economists and corporate executives are pushing for just such a balanced package, concluding that an aging population and ever-rising health care costs guarantee deficits too big to control by spending cuts alone.

Such arguments show signs of reigniting the battles within the Republican Party over fiscal policy that all but ended in the early 1990s. Back then the new generation of tax-cutters, inspired by President [Ronald Reagan](#) but more dogmatically antitax, had driven the once-dominant Republican “deficit hawks” — who disliked deficits more than they liked cutting taxes — nearly to extinction.

Among those hawks was Mr. Simpson.

The son of a Wyoming governor and United States senator, Mr. Simpson was the second-ranking Senate Republican for a decade, until he was ousted in late 1994 by one of the new guard, [Trent Lott](#) of Mississippi. Mr. Lott won by a single vote; Senator [Mitch McConnell](#) of Kentucky, now the Senate Republican leader, had pledged to support Mr. Simpson but switched to Mr. Lott, according to several people with direct knowledge of the balloting.

Mr. Simpson retired two years later. Since then, he has taught at Harvard and the [University of Wyoming](#), and served on other bipartisan panels including the Iraq Study Group. Mr. Obama's call brought Mr. Simpson, 78, back into the budget fray.

The welcome he received from the no-new-taxes forces was what he expected. Mr. Simpson was denounced as a stalking horse for new taxes by conservative bloggers, [Rush Limbaugh](#) (Rush Babe to Mr. Simpson, and not affectionately) and the antitax activist [Grover Norquist](#), a longtime nemesis.

"He's old and grumpy, and he doesn't like the Reagan Republican Party," Mr. Norquist said in an interview.

As if speaking to his adversaries, Mr. Simpson said in an interview: "Go ahead, keep babbling into the vapors. I'm not out to raise taxes but, for God's sake, if these dizzy guys can't figure out that this country..."

He trailed off, and then recalled the Reagan years, when the initial deep tax cuts were followed by years of tax increases to reduce deficits smaller than the current ones.

"Reagan didn't put anything off the table, if he felt it was for the good of the American people to tweak the tax system," he said.

As for the present, "I don't believe we ever had a war where we didn't have a tax to finance the war," Mr. Simpson added.

Slashing spending for earmarks, foreign aid and other unpopular appropriations would amount to "a sparrow's belch in the midst of a typhoon," relative to the debt projections, he said. And "when Medicare, Medicaid and [Social Security](#) suck up the entire revenue stream, we will be going to China and others to finance two wars, and that means borrowing it."

Others of the old-guard Republicans are also speaking out, both to support Mr. Simpson and to attest first hand that Mr. Reagan was not the antitax absolutist that the Republican right describes.

"He was not a doctrinaire conservative," said [Howard H. Baker Jr.](#), who was Senate majority leader and then White House chief of staff in the Reagan administration.

"Reagan was more pragmatic than those who now quote him," said former Senator [Pete V. Domenici](#) of New Mexico, who was chairman of the Senate Budget Committee in the Reagan years. Both Mr. Domenici and Mr. Simpson began their Senate careers among its most conservative Republicans; each left office labeled as a relative moderate in a party that had shifted further right on economic and social issues. "Those who claim they're better Republicans than we are — put their solutions in front of us and let's see if they're doable," Mr. Domenici said.

Mr. Simpson's co-chairman is [Erskine B. Bowles](#), a business-oriented Democrat who was President [Bill Clinton](#)'s chief of staff. "I think if you asked the hard left of my party if I was their favorite guy, they'd say no," Mr. Bowles said. While that is true, the right has been decidedly more hostile to Mr. Simpson.

Mr. Bowles said Mr. Simpson is in "the sensible center," where Mr. Bowles sees himself. "When he says we're doing it for our grandkids, I know it sounds corny, but it's really true," Mr. Bowles added.

