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Out of the Way, Please, Mr. President

The Gang of Six puts forward some ideas worth pursuing.



By PEGGY NOONAN

It's good, it represents progress, build from it. That would be a helpful approach to the Gang of Six proposal on the debt. Don't deep-six it because it's flawed. Flawless isn't going to happen. There will be a big election in 2012. A lot can be settled then, and after.

The Gang of Six—three Democrats and three Republicans in the Senate—this week put forward a plan aimed at reducing the national debt by almost \$4 trillion over the next 10 years. It includes \$500 billion in immediate cuts, and repeals a costly provision of ObamaCare. The plan would lower the top individual tax rate to 29%, push corporate tax rates down to 29% from 35%, and abolish the Alternative Minimum tax. On long-term spending the plan includes a legislative supermajority and sequester feature. In the words of a senator involved in the bargaining, "For the first time, we have some real teeth" in spending controls.

This is all pretty good. It moves the ball forward in the right ways.

As for the flaws: A lot is left up to committees and future action. A lot is left vague. But a critic of the plan, the Cato Institute's Dan Mitchell, highlighted with justice one of its central advantages: It "is not fueled by class-warfare resentment." These days that always comes as a surprise and a relief. And it might have come at a cost to the Democrats in the bargaining sessions.

The primary good of the plan is that it represents the work of three serious liberals and three serious conservatives who together are moving in the right direction, not the wrong one. They admit the spending crisis is a crisis; they appear to admit that we cannot, at least now, tax our way out of it. This seems small but isn't. Agreement on these essentials is an antidote to feelings of widespread public hopelessness: "Washington can't do anything." That hopelessness damages us more than we know, both at home and in the world. We have to look competent. We have to look like we can reform ourselves. The other day there was an apparently incorrect report that the Republicans and the president had neared a debt ceiling deal. The markets immediately jumped. Everyone wants Washington to work. People hunger for it.

The plan has already garnered a lot of opposition, much of it fair, but to quickly push it aside would be a real missed opportunity. Those who critique the plan can help it. Its cuts in entitlements and its attempts to reform them are unclear and appear insufficient. If the Senate passed a final proposal along Gang of Six lines, House Republicans would have to make the bill more concrete, more reliable in its mechanisms. And they'd



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probably have to make deeper cuts. Overshadowing all negotiations is the persistent threat of a credit downgrade. The senator at the bargaining table said that if a final bill doesn't contain "at least \$4 trillion in cuts," we will get a downgrade, which would carry costs greater than the cuts in the Gang of Six plan.

Attempts to find a final compromise are delicate, with a lot of moving pieces. But the Gang of Six proposal is cause for encouragement. It could not be turned into specific legislation quickly. Gang of Six member Kent Conrad said Thursday morning it could take six months to get it all done and through

the appropriate committees. But President Obama signaled this week, for the first time, that he might back a temporary debt ceiling increase to allow work to continue.

That's good. But a note on his efforts in the drama. It is time for the president to get out of the way.

For the longest time he wouldn't engage, and now he's engaged. For the longest time he didn't care about spending, and now he cares about spending. Good, both in terms of policy and for him. But his decision to become engaged has become a decision to dominate, to have his face in front of the television with his news conferences, pronouncements, and what his communications people are probably calling his "ownership" of any final agreement. He's trying to come across as the boss, the indispensable man, the leader. And, of course, the reasonable one.

That's all very nice and part of Political Positioning 101, but at this point it's not helping. He's becoming box-office poison. His numbers are falling. The RealClearPolitics composite job approval poll rating has him down six points since June 2, when the debt ceiling crisis began. That fall, from 52% to 46%, exactly tracks his heightened media presence and his increased attempts to be seen as dominant. Public Policy Polling, a Democratic firm, said that if he ran for president today he'd lose, that his job numbers are "worse than they appear," and that he continues to have real trouble with undecided voters.

And if you've watched him lately, you know why. When he speaks on the debt negotiations, he is not only extremely boring, with airy and bromidic language—really they are soul-killing, his talking points—but he never seems to be playing it straight. He always seems to be finagling, playing the angles in some higher game that only he gets. In 2½ years, he has reached the point that took George W. Bush five years to reach: People aren't listening anymore.

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The other day he announced the Gang of Six agreement with words that enveloped the plan in his poisonous embrace: "I wanted to give folks a quick update on the progress that we're making." *We're*. He has "continued to urge both Democrats and Republicans to come together." What would those little devils do

without Papa? "The good news is that today a group of senators . . . put forward a proposal that is broadly consistent with the approach that I've urged." *I've* urged. Me, me, me.

That approach includes "shared sacrifice, and everybody is giving up something." He was like a mother coming in and cheerily announcing: "Dinner's served! Less for everybody!"

We're trying to begin a comeback, not a famine. We're trying to take actions that will allow us to grow.

He's like a walking headache. He's probably triggering Michele Bachmann's migraines.

The Gang of Six members themselves should have been given the stage to make their own announcement, and their own best case.

The president, if he is seriously trying to avert a debt crisis, should stay in his office, meet with members, and work the phones, all with a new humility, which would be well received. It is odd how he patronizes those with more experience and depth in national affairs.

He should keep his face off TV. He should encourage, cajole, work things through, be serious, get a responsible deal, and then re-emerge with joy and the look of a winner as he jointly announces it to the nation. Then his people should leak that he got what he wanted, the best possible deal, and the left has no idea the ruin he averted and the thanks they owe him.

For now, for his sake and the sake of an ultimate plan, he should choose Strategic Silence. Really, recent presidents forget to shut up. They lose sight of how grating they are.

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