

Simpson takes aim at federal deficit

Former senator promotes 'Fix the Debt' at Chamber of Commerce

By Peter Jones

Say what you will about Alan Simpson, but the crusty former U.S. senator has a knack for breathing life into the \$20 trillion federal debt – whether by dancing his way through a “Gangnam Style” video or by holding a couple hundred members of the South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce in the palm of his hand.

“Nobody knows what a trillion is,” the 81-year-old bemoaned to the group on Jan. 21. “The Big Bang theory of the universe ... happened 13 billion 600 million years ago. That’s not even close to a trillion, and we owe 20 of those babies.”

For an hour, the Wyoming Republican did the sobering math, crunched the politics of denial and summed it up with his cantankerous sense of humor.

Simpson spoke at the invitation of Chamber President John Brackney, Colorado co-chair of Fix the Debt, Simpson’s nonpartisan campaign to raise public consciousness about the ongoing federal deficit and the looming national debt it has fostered.

“It’s not the issue of how did we get here. It’s what the hell do we do now?” the former senator told the roomful of business leaders.

Simpson offered his own ideas two years ago as co-chair, with Democrat Erskine Bowles, of President Obama’s National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. After seven months of meetings and testimony from more than 100 experts and interest groups, the commission released its proposal to reduce the federal deficit by nearly \$4 trillion and eliminate the national debt by 2035.

The final plan – a mix of broad spending cuts and tax increases – was backed by a majority of its bipartisan members, but did not reach the threshold required to send it directly to Congress, though legislation modeled on the report, known as Simpson-Bowles, was overwhelmingly rejected by the House



Former U.S. Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., urged action on the federal deficit during a stop Jan. 21 at the South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce. Simpson co-chaired President Obama’s National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform.

Photos by Peter Jones

of Representatives.

The former senator has no illusions about the mix of politics and hypocrisy that led Congress to rebuff the sizeable pill prescribed by Simpson-Bowles. He said even the advocacy groups that spoke during the commission’s hearings were not prepared to swallow their lumps of shared sacrifice.

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-- Former U.S. Sen. Alan Simpson

“Every one of them said this country is on a trajectory of debt, deficit and interest, which is unsustainable and unconscionable – and before they left the stand, they said, ‘don’t touch ours,’” Simpson said.

Nothing short of a multi-pronged, across-the-board approach is worth discussing, according to the outspoken Republican, who says such sacred cows as Medicare, Social Security and military spending must be placed on the table.

“We can no longer be the policemen of the world,” he said, noting the U.S. defense budget is \$740 bil-



A couple hundred civic and business leaders were entertained by former Sen. Alan Simpson’s quick quips during his talk last week on the national debt.

lion – \$200 million more than the top 17 nations combined.

As an example of perceived waste and the politics that go with it, Simpson pointed to the Defense Department’s schools for children of military personnel.

“They’re within a bus ride of a public school,” he said of the 61 institutions. “They all have a superintendent, principals, teachers and students, and the cost per student is 51,000 bucks a year. When you bring this stuff up, you get eaten by rats.”

Simpson’s ideas about taxes are equally contentious. He said legislators should dismiss any pressures coming from conservative lobbyist Grover Norquist, whose 2012 Taxpayer Protection Pledge was signed by 95 percent of Republican members of Congress and all but one of the party’s presidential candidates.

“What can Grover do to you?” Simpson said. “He can’t murder you. He can’t burn up your house. The only thing he can do is defeat you in the election. ... If your election means more to you than your country when it needs patriots, instead of panderers, you shouldn’t be in the Congress.”

That line received the most vociferous applause of the afternoon.

As for current debates about raising the nation’s debt ceiling, Simpson urged lawmakers to exercise caution.

“This isn’t about cutting spending,” he said. “It’s paying for what you already spent. If you did that in your own home, you’d be in deep stuff. ... It’s called default. People say debt means nothing. Well, it means something to the people who own it.”

Ultimately, the creditors will come calling, Simpson added:

“At some point, they’re going to say, ‘Well, you’re addicted to [debt] ... and you have a dysfunctional government that can’t get off its butt and do anything sensible about kicking it down. So we love you, and we’re going to loan you more money and you’re going to love it – and it’s going to cost you more money.’”

The wit and wisdom of Alan Simpson

In addition to the federal deficit, former Sen. Alan Simpson was in rare form as he touched – frankly, to say the least – on a range of other topics with his trademark sense of humor.

Tea Party

“The Tea Party guys are not all goofy and nuts. They just can’t believe what’s happening to their country. They have their own views about what to do. The only problem is some of them are about as rigid as a fireplace poker, but without the occasional warmth.”

Tax breaks

“I do not believe that if you give a rich guy a tax break that he’s going to then use it solely for job creation. ... He may use it for a Cayman Island kind of thing – I don’t want to sound like a Democrat, for God’s sake.”

Gun control

“I was on federal probation for shooting

mailboxes. ... I was a crack shot in the Army, an expert with the M-1. ... I’ve gunned my elk and my deer and antelope. I love it. But I’ll tell you one thing: Don’t tell me it’s sacred to have a thing in your hand that shoots 50 rounds a second.”

Chuck Hagel, Secretary of State nominee

“I think he’ll be good. He’ll have trouble getting confirmed because he made the wholly rational statement about the phrase ‘Jewish lobby.’ I’ve had my Israeli pals in the Senate call it the Jewish lobby, so he did and he got assured hell for it. Political correctness is like wearing duct tape over your mouth.”

Shared sacrifice

“There’s no such thing as shared sacrifice in this country since World War II. Nothing. People send other people to fight their wars. ... If we had a draft, we’d have a much more vigorous public discussion.”

