

“You can’t bring home the bacon when the pig is dead.”

Alan Simpson is a former state legislator, Wyoming’s colorful and outspoken Republican U.S. senator for 18 years and, most recently, co-chair of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. After 10 months of work in 2010, the bipartisan panel’s draft recommendations to reduce the deficit by reforming the tax code and cutting entitlements, among other measures, were never officially adopted. Since then, Simpson and his co-chair, Erskine Bowles, have testified before Congress urging adoption of their blueprint for economic recovery.

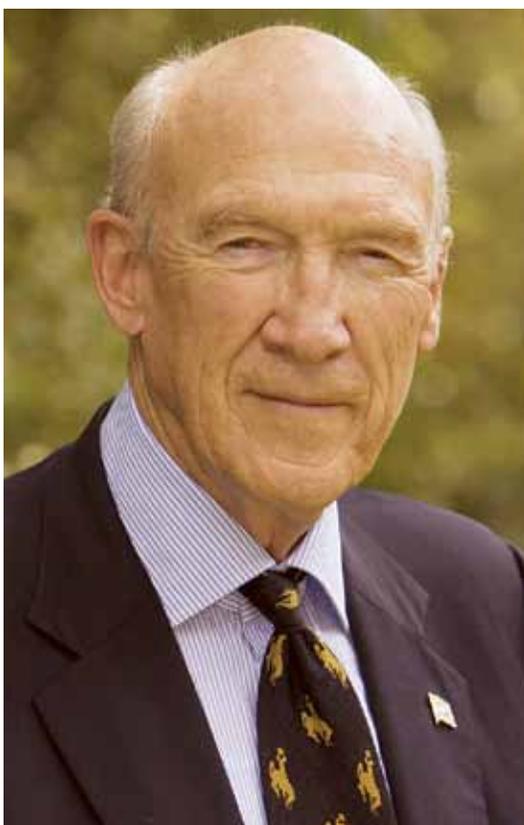
State Legislatures: Do you think the recommendations of your fiscal responsibility commission have a chance of being implemented? If not, what’s the risk to the country?

Simpson: Oh, I don’t know. It’s like a stink bomb in a garden party. We just keep telling people what is going on. We are a little disappointed that the president walked away from it. One of the great allies has been Bill Clinton. He actually went to the president and said, “Look, you appointed these guys by executive order.” I would have wrapped my arms around it and run with it, but it was not to be. But you know it won’t go away. You have an unconscionable, unsustainable, totally predictable chaos coming, and young people aren’t paying any attention. They don’t seem to get it. I didn’t give a damn about anything when I was 20 either.

SL: The president’s budget assumes Congress will suspend mandatory cuts in discretionary programs and defense that are supposed to begin next January because the congressional super committee failed to agree on a deficit reform plan. Do you think that will happen?

Simpson: No sane person—the president or anybody in Congress—is going to let that sequester take place. They’ll either come up with something or pass a law and suspend that part of it. But it is inexorable. Your country will borrow \$3 billion, \$600 million today and they will borrow \$3 billion, \$600 million tomorrow. And it’s not

going to anything. It is just running the country deeper in the hole. The debt limit now, while we were all asleep the last few weeks, essentially went to \$16.2 trillion. People don’t understand what \$1 trillion is. If you spend a buck a second from right now you wouldn’t reach a trillion for 32,500 years.



When [Erskine Bowles] and I go around the country and spend an hour with any group—lefties, righties—we’ll get a standing ovation. People are thirsting for someone to tell them the truth, not bullshit or mush.

SL: Why do you think it has been easier for commissions such as yours to come to a bipartisan consensus, but Congress can’t?

Simpson: We took a year, and it took us three months to establish trust. There is no trust in Congress. The caucuses consist of sitting down and figuring out how you can screw the Republicans or how you screw the Democrats, but nothing constructive. How can we embarrass the president? How can we embarrass Boehner? How can we embarrass McConnell? How can we embarrass Reid? If that creativity were directed to the debt and the deficit, it would take care of everything swiftly.

SL: Congress’ approval rating is at a historically low level. Can they do anything about it?

Simpson: They have to. The trigger point will come when the people who loan us money will say we just want a little more interest for our money. We will continue to loan you money, but we do want a little more interest. Then interest will tick up and inflation will tick up, and at that point the guy that gets hurt most is the little guy everybody talks about.

SL: And at that point something is going to happen?

Simpson: It will happen because people will say, “You know, I was borrowing money at 2 percent or 3 percent, if I could, and how did it

go to 6 percent. I just needed that to get my kid into community college or buy a secondhand car and, by God, you're at the wheel." They are going to take it out on them.

SL: Is that the only realistic way for things to change?

Simpson: It's the only way. It is called democracy. Any other way is chaos. There's been no shared sacrifice in this country since World War II. Nobody has had to do anything. We send other people to fight our wars and borrow money to pay for it.

SL: Should Congress change its rules to make it easier to get things done?

Simpson: One thing [Senator Robert] Dole and I used to do when we were in the leadership—and [Senator Robert] Byrd, too, on the other side—when someone would say they were going to filibuster, we'd say just three words: Bring your cot. We are going to stay in here for about six or eight days, and I think you will enjoy it. That is what you do. That works. Nothing difficult about it at all, except the sergeant-at-arms has to get that many cots.

SL: What do you think about the relationship between the state and the federal government?

Simpson: I was in the state legislature for 13 years. I loved it. We were always told we're independent and so on, but we always loved that federal money. State legislators are beginning to panic a little. They see the feds aren't going to be able to do what they used to do and it's tough. It spooks them. The relationship is always the same: "We don't like the federal government, but boy we sure like what comes from it." And that's an eternal thing. I spoke to the legislators in Washington. I laid it on, and they heard it. I just said, "Guys, the fun and games are over. You can't bring home the bacon when the pig is dead."

All of us were sent to Washington or Cheyenne or the state capital to get money. We weren't sent there to do something constructive. We were supposed to get the highway money. Go get the airport money. Go get the water line money. Go get the community college money. That was your job, and if you didn't do it, you got fired.

SL: What will it take for Republicans and Democrats to agree on entitlement reform and what will the effect be on states?

Simpson: You'd better find a mechanism because it's on automatic pilot, and it has no brakes. In our commission, we were going to take \$400 billion out of [Medicare] and not let it go up over 1 percent of GDP a year. Health care is the biggest issue confronting this country. Give up talking about Obamacare. You can call it Elvis Presley Care; it can't possibly work. Ten thousand people a day are turning 65. One person of every three weighs more than the other two. This is absolute madness; it's unsustainable, and everybody knows it.

SL: Do you think the candidates for president are they talking about the right issues?

Simpson: On our side of the aisle, if you're just going to talk about contraception and abortion and gay/lesbian issues, we haven't got a prayer. There are a lot more things important to Americans than those personal things, and especially with a party that says keep government out of our lives. You know, nobody can really create jobs. The economy will create jobs if people get their boots off the neck of the country. Things will grow. I never understood the tax cut in the first place myself. How do you get a tax cut when you are fighting two wars, borrowing the money to do it, and you have a health care or pharmacy bill with no revenue stream to support it. Madness.

Editor's note: These interviews are part of a series of conversations with opinion leaders. They have been edited for length and clarity. The opinions expressed are those of the interviewees, and not of NCSL.

You can read previous interviews at www.ncsl.org/magazine with:



John Boehner,
U.S. House
speaker



Jeb Bush,
former
Florida governor



Cecile Richards,
president,
Planned Parenthood



Grover Norquist,
president, Americans
For Tax Reform



Richard Ravitch,
former New York
lieutenant governor



Donna Brazile,
author and
political analyst



Karl Rove,
author and
political analyst



Jacques Chagnon,
president, Quebec
National Assembly



Charmaine Yoest,
president, Americans
United for Life