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Statement on the Fiscal Responsibility Summit

February 19, 2009

President Obama's intention to convene a fiscal responsibility summit is a very welcome development. It offers a valuable opportunity to focus public attention on our nation's unsustainable budget outlook and to highlight various approaches to meaningful action.

As a group of budget analysts and former senior budget officials, we view this summit as the first step to addressing the enormous long-term fiscal problem facing the United States. Without decisive action this problem will lead to serious harm to our economy and a huge financial burden on our children and grandchildren.

Tackling these problems will require a degree of sacrifice impossible under the existing policy process, which discourages bipartisan compromise and encourages procrastination and obstructionism. Unless those procedures are modified, and the American people are engaged in the process, future legislative attempts to address the looming fiscal crisis will almost certainly fail.

In our view, the American people are ready to confront the challenge. For the last three years several of us have traveled around the country as a group, discussing these issues with thousands of Americans in dozens of cities, in a bipartisan effort known as the Fiscal Wake-Up Tour. We have found that when Americans are given the facts and options in a neutral and bipartisan way, they want action and are willing to make difficult trade-offs.

We therefore urge the President to lead a major public engagement effort – beyond a one-day summit – to inform Americans of the scale and nature of the long-term fiscal crisis, explain the consequences of inaction and discuss the options for solving the problem. This should be bipartisan, and involve a serious conversation with Americans to help guide action in Washington. As a group with some experience in this domain, we stand ready to assist if needed.

We also believe that for this policy commitment to produce tangible results, the President and others who share the goal of fiscal responsibility must address the fact that the regular political process has been incapable of dealing with long-term fiscal issues. We see no alternative but to create an independent and truly bipartisan commission or other mechanism capable of bringing about decisive action that has broad public support. We therefore urge the President to support such a commission. For this commission or some other mechanism to break through the legislative logjam it will need four key elements:

- It must be truly bipartisan and develop solutions that command wide support.
- It must have a broad mandate to address all aspects of the fiscal problem while fostering strong economic growth.
- There must be no preconditions to the deliberations. All options must be on the table for discussion. Nobody should be required to agree in advance to any option.
- Recommendations must go before Congress for an up-or-down vote with few if any amendments. Such a game-changing process is not without precedents; controversial military base closings or the ratification of international trade agreements, for example, have long been governed by special rules along these lines, not by business as usual.

We are deeply worried about the long-term fiscal imbalance and the dangers it carries for the economy and for our children and grandchildren. We know the President is concerned as well, as are many Members of Congress in both political parties. We are ready to help in building public understanding of the problem and the options, and in crafting an approach that will enable the legislative process to deal with the problem.

This statement is offered by members of the Brookings-Heritage Fiscal Seminar. The views expressed are those of the individuals involved and should not be interpreted as representing the views of their respective institutions. For purposes of identification, the affiliation of each signatory is listed.

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