

# SAFE Commission

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## To stanch 'tsunami of spending'

**D**avid M. Walker is hardly a household name outside the beltway — that is, if it's even recognized at all. But lately Mr. Walker has been making a good deal of noise inside the beltway, but only as a voice crying in the wilderness.

Mr. Walker is comptroller general of the United States, and what he is saying should alarm each and every American. In a speech earlier this month, delivered to his hometown Rotary Club in Birmingham, Ala., he spoke passionately of this nation's "serious sustainability issues" — in health care, education, energy, immigration, and infrastructure. But all these, he stressed, pale in comparison to the "overwhelming" fiscal problems facing America if our government does not get a grip on its "large and growing structural deficits" — due largely to the now-and-future retirement of the Baby Boom generation and the "tsunami of [entitlement] spending" requisite to fulfilling its expectations for Medicare and Social Security.

While the Bush administration has made admirable progress in reducing the government's annual deficit, Mr. Walker said, the key is not so much the present, but the future — where this nation might be headed, particularly if Washington drops the ball on major entitlement reform.

The numbers, as Mr. Walker told Birmingham's Rotarians, are staggering. The country's total liabilities and unfunded commitments have risen from \$20 trillion to \$53 trillion in just the last seven years. For a bit of perspective, that amounts to \$175,000 in debt and liability *per capita*. Concern has increased to the point that Moody's, the renowned credit

rating agency, said earlier this month that, absent reform, the United States risks losing its cherished Aaa bond rating.

Mr. Walker's message has definitely not been lost on Rep. Frank Wolf. The 10th District Republican, in alliance with blue-dog Democrat Jim Cooper of Tennessee, is calling for the establishment of a commission — Securing America's Future Economy, or SAFE — to examine all manner of government spending, but especially the major entitlements (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid). In like fashion to the BRAC Commission on military installations, the SAFE legislation would require Congress to accept or reject, on an up-or-down vote, the commission's series of fiscal antidotes.

Mr. Wolf considers this bill one of the most important he's ever sponsored or been associated with in nearly three decades in Congress.

"Basically, it's legislation to save the country," he told us last week. "If it doesn't pass, I feel we're headed for big trouble . . . I'd give up my seat for this."

That says something of Mr. Wolf's commitment. Now he's trying to extract the same sort of principled backing from the White House. He, Mr. Cooper, and their allies are lobbying long and hard for President Bush to endorse or at least mention SAFE in his State of the Union address tonight.

As Mr. Wolf told us, the administration said it would give the commission idea an extended look "if I got [House Minority Leader John] Boehner and [House Minority Whip Roy] Blunt." Well, both men have signed on. It's high time the White House did, too. We'll be tuned in tonight to see if it does.