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# 'Gang of Six' in the Senate Seeking a Plan on Debt

By **JACKIE CALMES**

WASHINGTON — Days after [President Obama](#) called for forming a bipartisan group in Congress to begin negotiating a \$4 trillion debt-reduction package, the parties have not even agreed to its membership. Yet six senators — three Democrats, three Republicans — say they are nearing consensus on just such a plan.

Whether the so-called Gang of Six can actually deliver something when Congress returns from a recess in May could determine whether Democrats and Republicans can come together to resolve the nation's fiscal problems before the 2012 elections.

As Mr. Obama and Republican leaders have warred publicly over the budget, this small group of senators has spent four months in dozens of secretive meetings in offices at the Capitol and over dinner at the suburban Virginia home of Senator [Mark Warner](#), a Democrat.

The senators have weathered criticism from bloggers and even colleagues, including the leaders of their own parties, who oppose tampering with [Social Security](#) or taxes. The gang nearly collapsed several times, including two weeks ago.

The group's oldest members — Senator [Richard J. Durbin](#), 66, a progressive from Illinois who counts the Senate's only socialist as a friend and ally, and Senator [Saxby Chambliss](#), 67, a genial Georgia conservative whose nasty first campaign left lingering bad feelings among Democrats, and who is a confidant of Speaker [John A. Boehner](#) — illustrate that even with the mounting federal debt intensifying the partisan divide over spending and taxes, the severity of the fiscal threat is forging unlikely alliances.

If Mr. Durbin and Mr. Chambliss can cut a deal on Social Security and new tax revenues, their associates say, then just maybe all of Washington can come together.

For Republicans, that means accepting higher taxes and lower military spending. For Democrats, it would mean agreeing to curbs on the unsustainable growth of [Medicare](#) and

**Medicaid** spending, as well as tweaks to Social Security, to avert a big shortfall in 2037 and as a trade-off for Republicans' support on taxes.

Mr. Durbin and Mr. Chambliss reached those conclusions last year, each confronting the widening annual gaps between projected revenues and spending as the population ages and health care prices rise.

Mr. Durbin, the No. 2 leader in the Senate, was on Mr. Obama's bipartisan fiscal commission, which recommended some solutions. Mr. Chambliss had joined informally with Mr. Warner to host private tutorials for Senate colleagues of each party with experts like **Ben S. Bernanke**, the **Federal Reserve** chairman.

The two senators' paths merged last December.

Several months ago, with Mr. Durbin as its most surprising yes vote, 11 of the 18 members of the president's fiscal commission backed a blueprint to pare \$4 trillion from projected deficits in the first decade. It would cut domestic and military spending; curb Medicare and Medicaid; and overhaul the tax code, limiting or repealing tax breaks and using the new revenues to lower tax rates and reduce deficits. Separate from its debt-reduction plan, the panel proposed benefit and payroll tax changes to stabilize Social Security for 75 years.

Immediately, Mr. Chambliss and Mr. Warner enlisted four senators from the commission majority to negotiate writing the recommendations into legislation. Besides Mr. Durbin, the others were Senator **Kent Conrad**, a North Dakota Democrat who leads the Budget Committee, and Senators **Tom Coburn** of Oklahoma and **Michael D. Crapo** of Idaho, both Republicans.

"As I said to a Republican recently," Mr. Durbin said in an interview, "it's like we're on a long flight here and we've come so far there's no turning back — we've got to land the plane."

The effort holds peril regardless of the outcome. If successful, a plan could be taken up as Congress debates this spring over raising the nation's \$14.2 trillion debt limit. But the group is hardly assured of support from Senate colleagues, let alone lawmakers in the House, where Republicans, including dozens of new **Tea Party** supporters, refuse to consider raising revenues. If the group fails, that would probably signal doom for the broader bipartisan effort Mr. Obama wants.

Mr. Durbin, the liberal Democrat, and Mr. Chambliss, the conservative Republican, may have the most at stake. Mr. Durbin could be isolated in the Senate leadership, and Mr.

Chambliss potentially vulnerable given Republicans' penchant for ousting incumbents who deviate from the antitax line. Neither senator faces re-election until 2014.

An administration official recalled that in early 2010, when Mr. Durbin was named to Mr. Obama's fiscal commission, another White House official told its co-chairmen, "You'll never get Durbin's vote."

Nine months later, Mr. Durbin announced his support in The Chicago Tribune for the recommendations the chairmen had negotiated with members. "The question my closest political friends are asking is this: Why is a progressive like Dick Durbin voting for this [deficit commission](#) report?" he wrote. The answer: "Borrowing 40 cents out of every dollar we spend for missiles or food stamps is unsustainable."

So, Mr. Durbin added, "when we engage in the critical decisions about our nation's future budgets, I want progressive voices at the table to argue that we must protect the most vulnerable in our society and demand fairness in budget cuts."

That has been his mantra with disappointed allies in labor, women's groups and the Senate. Mr. Durbin, in the interview, cited a private meeting requested by Senator [Bernie Sanders](#), independent of Vermont, a socialist and "a good friend." Their exchange, Mr. Durbin said, captured the increasing difficulty in being a good progressive "at a time of limited resources."

Mr. Sanders said he respected Mr. Durbin for his good intentions. "But I think the direction in which he is going in working with some of the most very conservative members of the Senate is not correct," Mr. Sanders said.

Critics suggest that Mr. Durbin is seeking a new role to counter the prominence of Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#) of New York, his roommate and his rival in the Senate leadership.

But Andy Stern, a former labor leader who was on the fiscal commission and opposed its report, defended Mr. Durbin, saying, "It's classic Washington that we can't imagine that someone does something because they think it's the right thing to do."

That is Mr. Chambliss's claim as well. "I hear my critics; I pay attention to my constituents," he said in an interview. "But you've got to do the right thing and what's best for the country."

And Mr. Chambliss has been increasingly outspoken in arguing that additional revenues must be part of a debt-reduction plan, given the scale of the problem.

"I'm taking arrows from some on the far right," he told the Rotary Club of Atlanta in an appearance with Mr. Warner on Monday. "Are some people going to pay more in taxes? You bet."

A bolt came in February from [Grover Norquist](#), a Republican antitax activist, who wrote to Mr. Chambliss, Mr. Coburn and Mr. Crapo to say they would violate his group's "Taxpayer Protection Pledge" if they supported raising revenues for deficit reduction.

The trio countered the same day, releasing a letter telling Mr. Norquist that their effort broke no pledge "but rather affirms the oath we have taken to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic, of which our national debt may now be the greatest."

Perhaps more troublesome for Mr. Chambliss have been critics at home like Erick Erickson, a conservative blogger, Atlanta radio talk-show host and CNN contributor. "Is Saxby Chambliss Becoming a Democrat?" Mr. Erickson asked in a recent blog post.

For many actual Democrats, Mr. Chambliss remains negatively defined by his 2002 defeat of Senator [Max Cleland](#), a triple-amputee veteran of Vietnam, after a campaign that included an ad picturing Mr. Cleland with [Osama bin Laden](#). Mr. Chambliss's work on the Gang of Six has done as much as anything to soften attitudes.