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OPINION

The Conservative Case for McCain

 By **MARK SANFORD**
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Last week, I asked David Walker, the U.S. comptroller general, why he is quitting his job to travel the country on a "fiscal wake-up tour." His answer: Because we have only five to 10 years to address the federal government's looming shortfalls before we're faced with a fiscal crisis.

In about a decade, the twin forces of demographics and compound interest will leave few options for solving the fiscal mess Washington has created. By then, our options will all be ugly. We could make draconian spending cuts, or impose large tax increases that will undermine our economy in the competitive global marketplace. Or we could debase the value of the dollar by printing a large amount of money. This would shrink the overall value of the federal government's debt. It would also wipe out the value of most Americans' savings.

Mr. Walker is right. And I join many others in saying that federal spending is now as significant an issue as the war on terror, federal judgeships and energy independence. The U.S. stands at a fiscal crossroads -- and the consequences of inaction, or wrongful action, will be real and severe.

Fortunately, the presidential election offers us a real choice in how to address the fiscal mess. To use a football analogy, we're at halftime; and the question for conservatives is whether to get off the bench for the second half of the game.

I sat out the first half, not endorsing a candidate, occupied with my day job and four young boys at home. But I'm now stepping onto the field and going to work to help John McCain. It's important that conservatives do the same.

It's easy to get caught up in the pursuit of political perfection, and to assume that if a candidate doesn't agree with you 100% of the time, then he doesn't deserve your support. In fact, Mr. McCain is a lot closer to 100% than many conservatives realize. He has never voted for a tax increase in his 25 years in Congress. He holds an 83% lifetime rating from the American Conservative Union. He is listed as a taxpayer hero by Citizens Against Government Waste. And he is supported by noted conservatives Phil Gramm, Jack Kemp and others.

The process of iron sharpening iron is good for the GOP. But now, I believe, the time has passed for focusing on what divides us.



John McCain

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There is a yawning gulf between the viewpoints of Mr. McCain and those of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. Nowhere is this more evident than on the critical issue of the steady collapse of our government's financial house.

Since 2000, the federal budget has increased 72%, to \$3.1 trillion from \$1.8 trillion. The national debt is now \$9 trillion -- more than the combined GDP of China, Japan and Canada. Add in Medicaid, Medicare and Social Security commitments, and as a nation we are staring at more than a \$50 trillion hole -- an invisible mortgage of \$450,000 for every American family.

Hope alone won't carry us through the valley of the shadow of debt. The fact that neither Mrs. Clinton nor Mr. Obama has made cost-cutting a part of their political vocabulary is a clear indication that they would increase spending. In fact, Mrs. Clinton has already proven skillful at snagging pork. Over the past few years alone, she has attached some \$2.2 billion in earmarks to federal spending bills. Mr. McCain has asked for exactly \$0 in earmarks.

And while Mr. Obama's oratorical skills have been inspiring, his proposals would entail roughly the same \$800 billion in new government spending that Mrs. Clinton proposes. To his credit, Mr. Obama admits that his spending proposals will take more than three clicks of his heels to fund. He would pay for his priorities with a bevy of tax increases which he hopes taxpayers won't notice.

But taxpayers will notice. Mr. Obama plans to raise taxes on capital gains, dividends and corporate profits. He wants to hike estate taxes by 50%. And he wants to eliminate the cap on payroll taxes. These tax hikes would increase the burden borne by individuals and decrease the competitiveness of our economy.

I was elected to Congress in 1994 as part of a Republican Revolution that captured control of both the House and Senate. A number of us tried to apply the brakes to the Washington spending train. We didn't succeed. Six years later, I left Washington convinced that only a chief executive willing to use the presidential bully pulpit could bring spending under control.

Now, in John McCain, the GOP has a standard-bearer who would be willing to turn the power of the presidency toward controlling federal spending. Mr. McCain has one of the best spending records in Congress, and has never shied away from criticizing government pork-barrel spending.

The contrast between the two opposing teams is stark. It is time for the entire conservative squad to step onto the field. Who will join me in helping our team get the ball and move it down the field?

Mr. Sanford, a Republican, is the governor of South Carolina.

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