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CEOs to Washington: Strike a Deal—and Do It Now

By ALAN MURRAY

Concerns over falling off the "fiscal cliff" dominated discussions of the fifth annual meeting of The Wall Street Journal's CEO Council last week in Washington, D.C.



Nearly three-quarters of the chief executives attending the event listed the fiscal cliff as their biggest worry on the global landscape—above Europe's financial troubles, a China growth slowdown and uncertainty over conflict in the Middle East. They took little comfort from the comments of a parade of government officials, including Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner and Ohio Republican Sen. [Rob Portman](#), who spoke with them during their meeting.

"Going off the fiscal cliff would create a period of financial and economic instability," the CEOs said in an action item they adopted as their top priority. They urged President Obama and Congress to "take advantage of the chance for a grand bargain" on tax and spending issues "so businesses and consumers can plan for the long term."

Most of the CEOs in attendance had no hesitancy in endorsing higher taxes on affluent people like themselves, provided those tax increases were accompanied by serious and enforceable cuts in government spending.

Ninety percent indicated they would favor a package that included at least one dollar in tax increases for every four dollars in spending cuts.



Treasury Sec. Timothy Geithner says that higher tax rates for some Americans are a central part of the White House's deficit-reduction proposal, in an interview with WSJ's David Wessel at the CEO Council in Washington.



Jose Maria Aznar, former prime minister of Spain, talks with WSJ's Gerard Baker on the current state of the U.S. economy at the WSJ CEO Council.



Maryland Rep. Chris Van Hollen joins WSJ's Alan Murray at the CEO Council to discuss how Congress and President Obama can avoid falling over the fiscal cliff.



At the WSJ CEO Council, Maryland Rep. Chris Van Hollen discusses how Congress may trim the deficit and bring down tax rates.

In their comments, they mostly expressed frustration that political leaders in Washington could not do what needed to be done—even though what needed to be done was so abundantly clear.

The chief executive officers, who represent companies with nearly \$2 trillion in revenues and more than five million employees, called for an overhaul of corporate taxes by broadening the tax base, lowering tax rates and adopting a territorial tax system. They called for a comprehensive overhaul of the immigration laws that would remove barriers to immigration of skilled workers and encourage foreign students to stay in the U.S.

They also called for a "closer working relationship" between business and government to encourage the long-term competitiveness of the U.S. economy. And they urged the president to "support oil and gas development to promote energy diversity."

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