

*by C. Benjamin Ford*  
*Staff Writer*

Maryland Democrats accused Republicans who oppose raising the federal debt ceiling of “playing with fire” that could destroy the global economy.

With the nation facing a default on its obligations on Aug. 3, U.S. Rep. Christopher Van Hollen Jr. said time was running out, shortly before he entered into another meeting on the issue Thursday afternoon.

“You need to take a balanced approach and you shouldn’t be playing with fire when it comes to defaulting on the United States’ debt,” Van Hollen (D-Dist. 8) of Kensington said of the debt negotiations.

“A default would be catastrophic for our economy, and I hope that we end this dangerous game of chicken before real damage is done,” said Rep. John Sarbanes (D-Dist. 3) of Towson.

As the deadline nears, more independent analysts have weighed in that a default would be a global economic disaster, but many Republicans are refusing to listen to even their allies in the business sector, Van Hollen said.

"I am hoping that those who have their head in the sand that a default is an inconsequential event wake up to reality," he said.

Van Hollen, the ranking Democrat on the House Budget Committee, declined to comment on specific proposals offered by President Barack Obama to Republicans.

"But I believe the president should have room to negotiate a comprehensive and balanced deficit reduction plan," he said. "Unfortunately, it looks like hopes for a large deficit-reduction plan have been dashed by House Republicans who undercut their own speaker in this process."

The latest proposal from Obama calls for \$1.7 trillion in spending cuts across 10 years in exchange for closing tax loopholes on corporate business jets and subsidies to the oil companies.

Republican Reps. Roscoe G. Bartlett (R-Dist 6) of Buckeystown and Andrew P. Harris (R-Dist. 1) of Cockeysville have said previously they would not vote for an increase in the debt limit.

On Thursday, they could not be reached for comment.

Bartlett spokeswoman Lisa Wright said the entire Republican caucus planned to meet this morning in order to discuss the issue.

"For better or worse — better if you're a tea party member, worse if you're not — the Republican Party has a very strong, anti-compromise base, more opposed to compromise than we've seen in over 200 years," said Mark Graber, a University of Maryland, College Park,

professor who teaches courses on the U.S. Constitution and American politics. “Even [former Republican senator] Alan Simpson said the other day, ‘This is not my Republican Party.’”

Looking to the Constitution does not help, Graber said.

“The document was written in 1789, and it didn’t know of the tea party,” he said. “It didn’t know of the two-party system. James Madison isn’t going to help us.”

Minority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Dist. 5) of Mechanicsville said Thursday he was hopeful an agreement could be reached.

“While this week’s White House meetings have been constructive and progress has been made, it is in the best interest of Maryland and our nation that we move forward quickly to enact a plan to pay America's bills and reduce the deficit in a balanced way, not on the backs of seniors and the middle class,” Hoyer said.