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Robert Siegel talks with Tea Party member Allen West, the freshman representative from Florida, about the debt ceiling, tax hikes and spending cuts.

ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

Joining us now, a member of the House Tea Party Caucus, which has been uncompromising in its approach to the debt ceiling.

Congressman Allen West, freshman Republican from South Florida, welcome to the program.

Representative ALLEN WEST (Republican, Florida): Well, thanks, Robert. But uncompromising that's kind of me make sound like...

SIEGEL: Staunch. I'll say staunch.

Rep. WEST: ...an intransigent kind of fellow.

SIEGEL: No, I was saying staunch is how I meant it.

Rep. WEST: Oh, OK. Staunch sounds much more academic.

SIEGEL: The word this week from the Fed, from Wall Street banks, from hundreds of CEOs is

don't risk a default. Is your position, we'll go ahead and risk it if we don't get what we want on spending?

Rep. WEST: Well, this is the thing. You know, I could very easily sit up and say, sure, let's raise the debt ceiling. And then, what happens as far as our long-term spending problem that we have in Washington, D.C. and our long-term economic situation? Anyone that is reasonable will say that we need to contend with the spending issue that we have in Washington, D.C.

Anyone that is reasonable will say that we need to look at how we can put into law capping federal government spending as for the GDP and as well as bringing forth a balanced budget amendment.

SIEGEL: But which is worse in your view to not have a budget agreement, a spending-cut agreement and to raise the debt ceiling or to not raise the debt ceiling?

Rep. WEST: I think the thing would be for us to just raise the debt ceiling without dealing with a long-term solution.

SIEGEL: I want to ask you about something you tweeted yesterday. You said the president is threatening seniors won't get their Medicare checks - that means in August - the government, you wrote, will still have revenues coming in, and Geithner needs to prioritize.

Rep. WEST: That's right.

SIEGEL: You're saying that even if the debt ceiling isn't raised, that Secretary Geithner can pay seniors their Medicare, pay Social Security, Medicaid, the interest on the debt and there's enough money to do all that?

Rep. WEST: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I'm just looking at a chart that was sent out from the U.S. Treasury, as well as Goldman Sachs, that alludes to that point, that there's revenue that will be

there, about 250 billion, that will allow us to prioritize and then take care of that debt interest payment, take care of our seniors and take care of our military as well.

SIEGEL: But, actually, the Bipartisan Policy Center did a day-by-day analysis of income and obligations, and they concluded that if you paid the entitlements and the interest, you would not actually have enough money right there for military active-duty pay, veterans programs, federal salaries, benefits, food nutrition programs and several other Cabinet departments. You could choose (unintelligible).

Rep. WEST: Well, you just threw in several other Cabinet departments, maybe those aren't essential functions that we need to prioritize.

SIEGEL: The Justice Department?

Rep. WEST: As I said, I'm looking at this chart. It starts the first of August. It goes to the 29th of August. And this chart shows very well that when you look at the receipts line that those priorities, such as Medicare, Social Security, interest and essential defense, fall under that revenue line.

SIEGEL: I want to ask you about something that Senator Lindsey Graham, the South Carolina Republican, said yesterday. He said our problem, meaning the Republicans' problem, is we made a big deal about this, meaning the debt ceiling, for three months. How many Republicans have been on TV saying I'm not going to raise the debt limit? He included himself in that group. And he said we shouldn't have said that if we didn't mean it. We've got nobody to blame but ourselves.

His view is your party now has to climb down from threatening something that's catastrophic. You say it isn't catastrophic.

Rep. WEST: Well, I don't believe it's going to be catastrophic. I believe that from what I've seen right now is that we can take some of those essential functions. But then, once again, when I showed up here on the fifth of January, I knew that we had a debt problem, and I knew that

there was something that we will have to contend with.

Now, why, you know, I think one of the problems that I've seen coming out of the military, Washington, D.C. is that people continue to act in a crisis-action mode and not more so in a deliberative-planning mode and start to tackle some of these issues before you get down to the, you know, do-or-die aspect of it.

SIEGEL: Congressman Allen West, freshman from South Florida, Republican member of the Tea Party Caucus, thanks for talking with us.

Rep. WEST: Thanks for having me.

<http://www.npr.org/2011/07/14/137858527/tea-party-wont-compromise-on-debt-ceiling>