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CBS Fumbles Again

A lopsided report on Social Security

By Trudy Lieberman

If there were prizes given for the most one-sided, misleading story about Social Security this year, a **segment** aired on the *CBS Evening News* before Thanksgiving would make a great candidate.

In a breathless recitation of the horrors befalling the system, CBS painted a grim picture of Social Security, using scare words and phrases like “the system is headed for a crisis,” “the government is confronting a painful reality,” and “there’s no debating that we’re running out of time.” How’s that for opinion journalism on a news show?

Perhaps to substantiate the segment’s conclusions, CBS piled on quotes from those people in favor of cutting Social Security benefits and raising the retirement age. Here was Andrew Biggs, currently a resident scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, saying: “Americans are living longer, but they’re retiring earlier and saving less. Something in that equation has to give.” Biggs was a deputy Social Security commissioner in the Bush II administration and a Social Security analyst at the Cato Institute, which has been a leader in the efforts to privatize the system. CBS did not mention those credentials.

Biggs opined that Social Security was designed as insurance against poverty in old age, but CBS allowed him to make an oblique pitch for means testing the system. Said Biggs: “Today Social Security is paying more and more benefits to people who are essentially middle-aged and middle or higher income.” Fact check here. That is exactly what it was designed to do. It is social insurance for everyone who has paid into the system, not a welfare program for the poor.

Then came Erskine Bowles, the co-chair of the president’s deficit commission, who said: “We as a country have made promises we can’t keep.” Wisconsin Republican Paul Ryan, who will chair the House Budget Committee come January, offered his opinion that raising the retirement age is “one of the easier things to do to make this thing work,” but he told CBS “we shouldn’t do it on current retirees.” Huh? They are already retired and receiving benefits. No? He then advised that he would peg the retirement age to longevity. “So for my generation the retirement age will be sixty-seven,” and would move on down so “it wouldn’t reach seventy until the year 2103.” Fact check again. In 1983, Congress already raised the retirement age to sixty-seven for those in Ryan’s generation.

CBS presented a puzzling remark from historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who must have been consulted for a sound bite because she knew something about FDR, the father of Social Security; or maybe she was tapped in an effort to give “balance” to the piece without bringing

on experts who might have known the ins and outs of the subject.

Kearns Goodwin said that one reason Social Security was established was to get older workers to retire so younger ones could get jobs; she told viewers that “it’s ironic today that we’re in the opposite direction in wanting older people to work longer, so that we can afford to keep paying them.” Gosh! That makes it sound like the main reason they should work longer is just to get a government handout. Kearns Goodwin doesn’t come to my mind as a Social Security expert, and apparently she doesn’t understand that older workers **hang onto their jobs** because they must, given the demise of good employer-provided pensions, the inadequacy of 401(k) plans, and the difficulty of moving around the workplace when you’re older.

This is the second time that we have **questioned** CBS’s reporting on Social Security. In a segment aired in mid-October, the network did little to clear up much of the misinformation that continues to swirl around the program. That piece tried to discuss raising the retirement age, and we urged the network to give a more complete discussion of what that would mean for people. We also dinged CBS for using the misleading scare word “insolvency,” and suggested that it mention other ways to fix the program’s long-term fiscal problem besides raising the retirement age.

The end of last week’s segment gave a brief nod to one consequence of raising the retirement age, noting that a government study **found** that increasing the age for full benefits would hurt poor workers the most. By then, viewers would have gotten a one-sided picture and may have missed the kicker: “Raising the retirement age alone won’t solve Social Security’s problems. Most reform plans also call for higher payroll taxes on the wealthy and cuts in benefits.”

CBS viewers deserve better.

For more from Trudy Lieberman on Social Security and entitlement reform, click [here](#).