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Thursday, November 25, 2010

Telling Stories

by digby

If you're like me you are the designated "liberal" facing a week-end of arguing politics with certain cranky conservative relatives who listen to waaay to much hate radio. It can be exhausting just trying to keep from laughing out loud at some of the ridiculous Beckian nonsense that's being spread these days.

But if you've a mind to try to educate somebody about Social security, I've found over the years that it's best not to get into details, but rather tell the story. [Open Left has come up with a good primer](#) if you'd care to refresh your memory and these quotes are a good place to start:

It began in 1982 at the "Rebuilding Social Security" Conference at the radical-right Heritage Foundation, but the plot against [Social Security](#) was fleshed out by Butler (a Cato director) and Germanis (an analyst at Heritage) in the Fall 1983 issue of Cato's journal, summarized through quotes here: [Emphasis added.]

"**Lenin** recognized that fundamental change is contingent upon ... its success in isolating and weakening its opponents. ... we would do well to draw a few lessons from the Leninist strategy. (p. 547)

"we must recognize that we **need more than a manifesto** ... we must ... construct ... a coalition that will ... reap benefits from the IRA-based private system Ferrara has proposed but also **the banks, insurance companies, and other institutions that will gain** from providing such plans to the public." (p. 548)

"By approaching the problem in this way, we may be ready for [the next crisis in Social Security](#)." (p. 548)

"From a purely political standpoint, it should be remembered that the elderly represent a very powerful and vocal interest group." (p. 549)

A Plan of Action

"The first element consists of a campaign to achieve small legislative changes that embellish the present IRA system, making it in practice a small-scale **private Social Security** system. ... the **natural constituency for an enlarged IRA**

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system must be ... welded into a coalition for political change." (p. 551)

"The second main element ... involves what one might crudely call **guerrilla warfare against both the current Social Security system and the coalition that supports it.**" (p. 552)

Indeed, that was just the first time they had laid out a "plan" in detail. In reality, the enemies of old age dignity have been fighting it since it was first proposed.

[Here's](#) a very famous fellow arguing for its privatization 45 years ago --- due its imminent bankruptcy:

We're against those entrusted with this program when they practice deception regarding its fiscal shortcomings, when they charge that any criticism of the program means that we want to end payments to those people who depend on them for a livelihood.

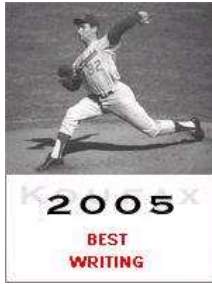
They've called it "insurance" to us in a hundred million pieces of literature. But then they appeared before the Supreme Court and they testified it was a welfare program. They only use the term "insurance" to sell it to the people.

And they said Social Security dues are a tax for the general use of the government, and the government has used that tax. There is no fund, because Robert Byers, the actuarial head, appeared before a congressional committee and admitted that Social Security as of this moment is 298 billion dollars in the hole. But he said there should be no cause for worry because as long as they have the power to tax, they could always take away from the people whatever they needed to bail them out of trouble. And they're doing just that.

A young man, 21 years of age, working at an average salary -- his Social Security contribution would, in the open market, buy him an insurance policy that would guarantee 220 dollars a month at age 65. The government promises 127. He could live it up until he's 31 and then take out a policy that would pay more than Social Security. Now are we so lacking in business sense that we can't put this program on a sound basis, so that people who do require those payments will find they can get them when they're due -- that the cupboard isn't bare?

At the same time, can't we introduce voluntary features that would permit a citizen who can do better on his own to be excused upon presentation of evidence that he had made provision for the non-earning years? Should we not allow a widow with children to work, and not lose the benefits supposedly paid for by her deceased husband? Shouldn't you and I be allowed to declare who our beneficiaries will be under this program, which we cannot do?

I think we're for telling our senior citizens that no one in this country should be denied medical care because of a lack of funds. But I think



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we're against forcing all citizens, regardless of need, into a compulsory government program, especially when we have such examples, as was announced last week, when France admitted that their Medicare program is now bankrupt. They've come to the end of the road.

That was Reagan, of course.

They have been lying and fearmongering from the beginning. But by the time the Cato Institute put together that plan in the early 80s, they had realized that they needed to be prepared for the right opportunity to implement the destruction of the program. Pete Peterson and the Concord Coalition and various other fronts have been used over the years (with many willing Democrats, I might add) to prepare the ground. With irrational Shock Doctrine "austerity" being the new fad throughout the western world, they figure this may be the moment they've been waiting for. (They have thought so before, but this time may actually be different -- we do have a global economic crisis going on.)

The facts are what they are. You can read all about it all over the internet. Even the Catfood Commission draft admitted that SS is not in danger of bankruptcy and has no effect on the deficit and you can argue with your cranky uncle about that stuff all day long. But what most people don't know is *the story* of how all this came to be and I've found it quite useful to tell it. You probably won't convince the uncle, but the kids who overhear the discussion and the quiet members of the family who usually only hear one side will have a way to think about this besides the conventional wisdom.

On the other hand, it's often the better part of valor to just start arguing about sports or gossiping about the people who aren't there and let the whole thing go. Hate radio has made this type of argument far more crazy and incoherent lately than it used to be.

Update: Sam Seder had an entertaining show with Matt Taibbi yesterday on the same subject of how to talk to your right wing relatives. [You can listen to the podcast here.](#)

Update II: By the way, this is the racist swill that your right wing relatives are all listening to:

[Spocko's Brain](#)
[Big Brass Blog](#)
[Rsspect](#)
[Talk Left](#)
[Donkey Rising](#)
[Suburban Guerrilla](#)
[Paperweight's Fair Shot](#)
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I don't know about you, but when I was a kid (and it was a long time ago, long before "political correctness" was even thought of) the story of the Indians helping the Pilgrims was standard school age American storytelling. And way back then many kids claimed Indian heritage and took pride in the native American contribution to our shared culture. This racist screed doesn't go back to the 1950s, it goes back to the 1850s.

At this point it's clear that according to Rush, there's literally nothing good you can say about a racial minority in America (unless they are dutifully serving as right wing poster children.)

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