



The 80-Year Conservative War On Social Security Is Back For More

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A new battle is brewing over Social Security in 114th Congress. The House [passed](#) a rule last week that critics say could hasten a crisis on the disability side of the program in late 2016, allowing Republicans to use the looming threat of benefit cuts as leverage in negotiations. New Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has hinted at his hopes for a grand bargain on entitlements, and House Budget Chair Tom Price (R-GA) signaled Monday that he too had big ambitions for Social Security reform.

Social Security, in more ways than one the mother of all U.S. entitlement programs, has been the dragon that conservatives have succeeded in slashing, but never slaying, over its 80-year history. Their opposition has morphed from outright ideological grounds as the program was being debated during the New Deal era to a campaign masked in careful rhetoric once Social Security became virtually untouchable as a political animal.

Republicans know they have a new opportunity with the disability trust fund and a leverage point that comes along once every 20 years, and [they're seizing it](#). Price floated some favorite proposals like means-testing, increasing the eligibility age, and individual accounts (otherwise known as privatization). He described it as the GOP's effort to "normalize the discussion and debate about Social Security."

Democrats have certainly undertaken and signed onto changes to Social Security opposed by its staunchest supporters. But the program has never been perceived by the left as an existential threat the way it has been by many on the right. To understand where conservatives are now, you have to understand how they got there. The following is derived in large part from "The Battle for Social Security," authored by Social Security Works's co-director Nancy Altman, and TPM's own consultations with other experts on the program.

INITIAL GOP OPPOSITION (1933-35)

FDR began advocating for an old-age insurance program shortly after taking office in 1933. While the debate among Democrats largely centered on what form the program should take, whom it should cover and how it should be paid for, Republicans warned that the program would

"impose a crushing burden on industry and labor" and "establish a bureaucracy in the field of insurance in competition with private business."

Republicans petitioned for the old-age insurance program -- what became Social Security -- to be struck from the House's bill entirely, leaving a much smaller version of welfare for the elderly. "Never in the history of the world has any measure been brought here so insidiously designed as to prevent business recovery, to enslave workers and to prevent any possibility of the employers providing work for the people," Rep. John Taber (R-NY) said, arguing against the program.

In the Senate, Sen. Daniel Hastings (R-DE) also moved to strike the program from the legislation, warning that it would "end the progress of a great country and bring its people to the level of the average European."

Social Security still passed Congress and was signed by Roosevelt in 1935, though it did not cover nearly as many people or provide the same level of benefits as the program does today.

TRYING TO STOP ITS GROWTH (1935-1955)

Despite the passage of Social Security, conservatives still believed that they could undo the new program. In the 1936 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Alf Landon, governor of Kentucky, described Social Security as "a fraud on the workingman" and "a cruel hoax."

"The Republican party will have nothing to do with any plan that involves prying into the personal records of 26 million people," Landon said in one address. The Republican National Committee sent out mailers campaigning against it.

But FDR trounced Landon, and the Roosevelt administration, his successor Truman, and Democrats in Congress started working on ways to expand the program toward its goal of universal coverage. When the disability program was up for debate in 1949, Republicans criticized it. They also petitioned against an increase in benefits, arguing that Social Security was intended to provide only a income floor for older Americans.

Some still pushed for the program to be repealed entirely. "The old-age and survivors insurance program is a grossly unsound and ineffective tool for the social-security purposes it attempts to accomplish," Rep. Carl Curtis (R-NE) said when the 1949 amendments were being debated. He lobbied to replace it with a program with much smaller benefits.

But by 1955, with the notable assistance of Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, who called those who wanted to abolish Social Security "stupid," the program as it exists today -- with near-universal coverage, better benefits and a disability component -- was effectively in place.

THE REAGAN REFORMS (1980s)

As Social Security cemented itself as a fixture of the American safety net, Republicans faced something of a crisis about how to discuss the program. As late as 1962, conservatives like

Ronald Reagan were saying that the program had put the United States "down the road in the image of the labor Socialist Party of England."

The debate largely subsided with the program solvent and other issues dominating the political discourse for the next two decades. But, coincidentally, as Reagan took the White House, demographic trends were putting a squeeze on the program. Reagan appointed Rep. David Stockman (R-MI), who had once called Social Security "closet socialism," to oversee his budget office.

Publicly, Reagan warned that the program was "teetering on the edge of bankruptcy," but Stockman's private remarks suggest that the administration saw the crisis as an opportunity for cuts. The White House pushed through an elimination of a "frozen" minimum benefit and student benefits without much Democratic support in 1981.

The crisis "will permit the politicians to make it look like they're doing something *for* the beneficiary population," Stockman said, "when they are doing something *to* it which they normally wouldn't have the courage to undertake."

But the public rhetoric was markedly different. "Today, we see an issue that once divided and frightened so many people now uniting us," Reagan said as he signed a 1983 bipartisan bill that slowly increased the retirement age while also boosting payroll tax rates.

PREPPING FOR NEXT BATTLE (1980s-2000)

Behind the scenes, though, conservative thinkers were dismayed that the Reagan White House had come nowhere close to dismantling the program as had once been hoped. Wonks at the conservative Heritage Foundation warned that they must work to "prepare the political ground so that the fiasco of the last 18 months is not repeated" and they could achieve the "radical reform of Social Security."

Privatization -- called "individual accounts," which had people investing their money, eliminating the base benefit that Social Security had been conceived as -- was the goal. They considered young people "the most obvious constituency for the private alternative" and pondered ways "to detach, or at least neutralize" the older Americans who were or would soon be benefitting from the program in its current form.

Again, however, Republicans seemed to recognize the political realities that the last few decades had solidified and what that required of their public rhetoric.

"It's not a welfare program," President George H.W. Bush said. "It's sacrosanct."

BUSH'S FAILED PRIVATIZATION PLAN (2000-2005)

Conservatives finally made their play for privatizing Social Security during the second Bush administration.

George W. Bush told conservatives in the midst of the 2000 campaign that Republicans "have to find a way to allow people to invest a percentage of their payroll tax in the capital markets" -- a new incarnation of the individual accounts or privatization concept.

But the GOP was getting sharper with its rhetoric. The libertarian Cato Institute renamed its existing Project on Social Security Privatization to the Project on Social Security Choice in 2002. The overall effect of the Bush-era proposals was the same, turning a guaranteed benefit into something else entirely, but they had figured out what they thought were better ways to talk about it.

"BANISH PRIVATIZATION FROM YOUR LEXICON," read a memo that Republican pollster Frank Luntz gave Bush during the 2004 campaign. But while Bush made Social Security a top priority at the onset of his second term and undertook a national tour to discuss the issue, those who support the traditional program rallied against it.

The effort -- which TPM covered extensively; long-time readers might [recall](#) the Fainthearted Faction -- proved to be a debacle for Bush. Formal legislation never even got a full vote in Congress, and in 2006, Democrats took control of both chambers. Republicans appeared to be so scarred by the episode that the notion of major changes to Social Security was rarely broached in the following years.

But now, nearly a decade later, conservatives think they have another shot.