
Steigerwald: It's time for Social Security choice in this country

By BILL STEIGERWALD

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I've hated Social Security since 1964, when I made \$547 that summer as a rookie stock boy in the warehouse of a Pittsburgh restaurant chain. That's when the federal government first started swiping a portion of my paycheck under the pretense that it would put the money aside for my retirement years.

The summer of 1964 - 45 years and a dozen low-paying bartending and newspaper jobs ago - was also when I heard Barry Goldwater boldly declare that Social Security should be voluntary.

Most people I knew then - and, sadly, most people I know now - thought Goldwater was a kook for saying such anti-socialist things. But I dug Barry's voluntary idea at age 17 and I still do, though I've known for a long time that my fellow Americans and I will never live to see it happen.

Now, as I near age 62, I'll finally be getting some of my Social Security money back from the crooks and fools who grabbed it, spent it as fast and stupidly as they could and didn't save a penny of it for me.

Like many other eligible Baby Boomers and more than 40 percent of all recent Social Security recipients, I recently signed up to get my retirement benefits at age 62.

Thanks to the recession - not to mention fears of the high inflation that is coming - for many people it makes much more sense to take Social Security at 62 instead of waiting until their official retirement age, which for those in my birth year of 1947 would be 66.

Taking Social Security early means I'll get 25 percent less each month than I'd get in 2013 - or about \$1,600 a month instead of about \$2,100. But I'll take my chances. By 2013, I could be as dead as General Motors and the U.S. dollar.

Now, I realize Obama is busy trying to win all of America's wars, provide everyone in the U.S. with free health, save Earth from global warming and fix the economy of the solar system. But I'd like to offer him and his administration the same sweet deal with my Social Security account that I offered to President Bush four years ago.

In an op-ed column in early 2005, I discreetly asked Bush, a fellow Boomer, if he could arrange for the Social Security folks to give me back all of "my" Social Security money in one big spendable, investable, inheritable lump.

Adjusted for inflation, between 1964 and 2004 my employers and I put a total of \$282,000 in payroll taxes into my Social Security and Medicare accounts. If I retired at 66 and lived another 16 years, which was my life expectancy, I would have collected a total of \$352,000.

In other words, without factoring for future inflation - something Washington hardly ever does anyway - the Social Security system could have saved about \$70,000 in future payments to me by giving me "my" \$282,000 up front.

I promised Bush then that if he'd accede to my humble request, which he didn't do, the bum, I would never ask for another nickel from the Social Security Administration and that I wouldn't tell anyone.

But I realize today I was being a selfish, unpatriotic libertarian. With the federal government in much worse fiscal shape now than it was then, my great idea - let's call it Social Security Choice - deserves to be widely publicized.

At 62 every aging Boomer should have the option to make a lump-sum deal with Social Security or receive their SS money in monthly dribs and drabs for the rest of their lives.

I'll leave it to Cato Institute scholars to do the real-world numbers, but surely such an option would be a win-win deal in the long run for individuals and the country.

It would help save trillions in future retirement benefits it won't be able to afford to provide anyway.

It would stimulate the heck out of the stalled economy. And it would provide overdue monetary and moral reparation to millions of middle-class Baby Boomers who for their entire working lives were forced to invest in Washington's crummy cross-generational Ponzi scheme.

My Social Security contribution numbers are bigger today, now that I've worked another five years. I and my employer have each kicked in another \$25,000 or so, making the 45-year contribution to my retirement roughly \$332,000 in current dollars.

Make me a test case, a pilot program, a guinea pig, whatever you want to call it. Tell Social Security to cut me a check for a lousy \$300,000 and we'll call it even. I'll promise to never ask for anything again from the federal government. If I have to, I'll even buy a new Malibu hybrid.

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