

Obama's offer to cut Social Security spending

What happened

President Obama this week unveiled a detailed, 10-year budget proposal that for the first time would include cuts in Social Security spending, in an attempt to woo congressional Republicans back to the negotiating table on a "grand bargain." Obama proposed cutting \$930 billion in planned spending on domestic programs and entitlements, while raising \$580 billion in new revenue through the "Buffett" tax requiring millionaires to pay a minimum tax rate of 30 percent, higher taxes on tobacco, and capping tax breaks for the wealthy. The budget would cut Social Security by \$230 billion over 10 years by using a different formula, called "chained CPI," to make future cost-of-living adjustments to benefits and tax brackets. Obama said his budget would reduce the deficit by \$1.8 trillion over 10 years, and could therefore replace the \$1.2 trillion sequestration cuts to military and domestic spending that have begun to go into effect. "I am willing to make tough choices that may not be popular within my own party," he said, "because there can be no sacred cows for either party."

House Speaker John Boehner immediately dismissed Obama's budget, saying "modest entitlement savings" should not be held "hostage for more tax hikes." But some Republicans welcomed the president's proposals as the first step toward a broad deficit-reduction deal. Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina praised the president for "showing a bit of leg."

What the editorials said

Social Security cuts are a "bad idea," said *The New York Times*. Retirees will be more heavily dependent on the program in coming years, since traditional pensions no longer exist and few people have adequate 401(k)s. It's no surprise that "the Left is outraged" at any hint of entitlement cuts, said the *Financial Times*, but this is exactly the sort of compromise needed for long-term fiscal reform. An agreement to reduce deficit spending would remove the "persistent question mark hanging over the U.S. recovery."

Thanks, but no thanks, said *NationalReview.com*. This calculated "feint at a grand bargain" is just more of the same Obamanomics,



Obama: "There can be no sacred cows."

a supposed "compromise" of higher taxes and gimmicky spending cuts that would nullify \$1.2 trillion in sequestration cuts. He even includes a brand-new universal pre-K program, whose \$77 billion cost would be funded by nearly doubling the federal cigarette tax to \$1.95 a pack. The budget's only purpose is "to generate press coverage about how reasonable the president is."

What the columnists said

Obama has been reasonable all along, said Jonathan Chait in *NYMag.com*, though Republicans have refused to admit it. Obama's

new budget offers the same entitlement cuts and modest tax increases that he's been offering since 2011, and that Republicans have repeatedly rejected for the simple reason that they "hate his ideas and hate him." Putting his previous offers into a budget document is simply a "message strategy" to convince the Washington establishment that "Obama Is Serious." Nonetheless, his offer to cut Social Security is a mistake, said Kevin Drum in *MotherJones.com*. Republicans will treat Obama's triangulation as a "new baseline to negotiate down from," while continuing to reject all new taxes.

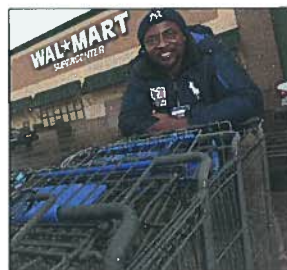
As a "starting point for negotiations," this budget is a welcome first step, said Michael Tanner in *NationalReview.com*. Putting entitlement reform on the table is "not an easy thing for a Democrat to do," and we should credit the president with finally recognizing that we're on the road to fiscal crisis. This budget does little to solve it, of course, but "the longest journey starts with a single step."

So will Republicans return to the negotiating table to talk grand bargain? said Ezra Klein in *WashingtonPost.com*. At this point, they're "out of excuses." They can't convincingly say Obama isn't willing to meet them halfway, as chained CPI was actually their idea. And as the sequester begins to bite into unemployment checks, Medicare reimbursements, and national park hours, outraged calls for a balanced deal to replace it will only get louder. The White House has called the Republicans' bluff. "The question now is whether, as the pressure mounts, they double down against compromise, or they begin to fold."

It wasn't all bad

■ Twitter is just a distraction for many, but one Irishwoman has the social network to thank for locating her senile mother last week. Joanne Mehaffey turned to Twitter when her mother, Diane, who has Alzheimer's disease, failed to come home from a walk. She posted a picture of Diane and asked her followers to retweet; hundreds did. The elderly woman was eventually spotted eight miles from her home by Twitter user Christina McStravick. "My husband gives me a hard time for going on Twitter too much," said McStravick. "He can't do that anymore."

■ After Bismark Mensah helped a customer load her car at the Seattle Walmart where he works, he noticed that she had left an envelope behind. The Ghanaian immigrant, 32, was used to finding lost or discarded items in customers' carts, but nothing like what he found inside the envelope—\$20,000, in cash. Mensah, who earns \$9 an hour, didn't think twice. He ran after Leona Wisdom's car and handed it back right away. The supermarket worker refused to accept any kind of financial reward from Wisdom, and said keeping her money never occurred to him. "My conscience wouldn't allow it," he said.



Mensah at work

■ A 7-year-old cancer patient from Atkinson, Neb., had a dream come true last week, when he scored a 69-yard touchdown run for his beloved University of Nebraska football team. Jack Hoffman, who has been battling brain cancer for two years, joined players for the final moments of the Cornhuskers' spring exhibition game. Hoffman took a handoff from quarterback Taylor Martinez, zigzagged up the field, and scored the game's final points. The boy's father said the family was "very optimistic" about Jack's prognosis. "Husker fans have been so incredible to Jack," said Andy Hoffman.