



OPINION: MAKE A RESOLUTION TO FIX SOCIAL SECURITY - DANIEL MCCARTHY

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In the dreamlike days between Christmas and the regular work week's return in the new year, it's easy to believe all things are possible.

Indulge in as much pie as you like -- a resolution to eat healthier in 2025 will balance the scales.

For most of us, this is harmless self-deception.

Unfortunately, Congress has the same mentality, and it's produced a bloated government that soon won't be able to afford what's been promised to taxpayers.

Social Security and Medicare have some 10 years left before their trust funds are exhausted and they'll no longer provide full benefits.

Congress knows the deadline. Every year, a report from the programs' trustees spells it out.

The latest figures say Social Security will run dry beginning in 2035, with Medicare following suit the next year.

Yet those estimates, from May, are already out of date because the Senate decided to ring out 2024 by passing a proposal that actually makes Social Security *less* solvent and brings the breakdown a full year closer.

A bipartisan bill taken up in December makes people who already have state, local or federal government pensions eligible for more Social Security benefits than before.

What the program actually needs, if it's going to survive another generation, is the opposite approach: means testing to match limited resources with the people who need them most, rather than expanding payouts to people with other retirement resources.

While his colleagues played Santa Claus, Sen. Rand Paul risked being branded a Grinch, proposing an amendment to prolong Social Security's life by gradually raising the retirement age to 70.

Only two fellow Republicans -- Utah's Mike Lee and Wyoming's Cynthia Lummis -- backed his effort.

The rest of the Senate, Republicans and Democrats alike, seems to view shoring up Social Security (and Medicare) as a resolution for some future new year.

Donald Trump has said many times he won't allow cuts to Social Security.

But by doing nothing -- or worse, adding to the program's burdens -- Congress is, in fact, acquiescing to cuts, and drastic ones.

Before the December expansion proposal, Social Security was already set to meet only 83% of its obligations after 2035: in effect, an across-the-board cut of 17% from then on.

The scenario is similar for Medicare, which will only be able to pay about 89% of its Hospital Insurance obligations after 2036.

What would seniors say if a candidate explicitly proposed slashing Medicare by 11%?

If Congress can't get serious about entitlement reform, elections at the start of the next decade will be overwhelmed by the crisis, which will confront candidates with a choice of big cuts, higher taxes or quickly -- not gradually -- raising the eligibility age or implementing means testing.

The longer Congress postpones the reckoning, the more painful it will be, and the greater the threat some next-generation Bernie Sanders turns the emergency into a class war.

Progressives fear means testing because it puts the lie to the idea Social Security and Medicare are purely savings or insurance programs, rather than wealth transfers.

It makes no sense to send millionaires or billionaires Social Security checks, but a need-based entitlement wouldn't have as wide a base of recipients and so not as much political support.

As the Kamala Harris campaign demonstrated, Democrats understand that openly campaigning on higher taxes on everyone is a losing strategy.

But raising taxes on some people -- namely, the wealthy -- to pay for more benefits for everyone is the kind of thing that might well command a majority in an emergency.

The possibilities grow more extreme as the road gets shorter.

The time to take a detour is now, but with the new House of Representatives so closely divided, passing major reform is almost unimaginable.

This is where Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy come in.

Their Department of Government Efficiency is tasked with curbing wasteful discretionary spending, not with entitlement reform.

But the power of DOGE is greater than its formal responsibilities suggest.

Musk, after all, owns one of the nation's most important news and opinion platforms: X, the social media site formerly known as Twitter.

DOGE can be an educator as well as an auditor.

Simply by calling attention to the fiscal realities that apply throughout the federal government, to entitlements as well as discretionary spending, Musk and Ramaswamy can accelerate Congress' timetable for action.

Left to their own devices, lawmakers would put off the hard work until the last minute, making reform a New Year's resolution for five years from now, or later.

Musk, Ramaswamy and their allies can reshape public opinion on Social Security and Medicare solvency right now.

If they do, Washington might still take years to catch up, but elected officials will be moving faster than they would of their own accord -- and maybe fast enough to avert disaster.



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