DEBATING SOCIAL SECURITY

In real word meanings it is the military budget which presumably provides for the security of our society while so-called Social Security is really a means for supporting individuals and families. But the basic questions around both are how we can afford them or how we can trim the costs without endangering our security or well-being.

Yet for political and perhaps sound psychological reasons, Social Security has been portrayed as a kind of insurance program, even to feeding the illusion that behind every number there is an account someplace, perhaps stored in a Baltimore computer, to which we voluntarily contribute a percentage of our earnings to collect back when we retire. This image of thrift has no doubt helped enshrine Social Security into an inviolable fortress, as some foolhardy politicians discovered to their consternation this fall. So powerful is the notion of this fund as something we personally own that it has been successfully extended, by name only, to lend respectability to other forms of welfare under the title S.S.I., although all of this assistance to the aged, blind and disabled is paid out of general revenues. The result is not only a further isolation of the remaining welfare programs as the province of the "unworthy poor," that old vestige of the Elizabethan poor laws, but an altogether unjustified acceptance of a payroll tax that pays for only a fraction of Social Security and bears little relation to what we put in it ourselves.

The persistence of the payroll tax as a means for paying for one form of our Social Security while military expenditures automatically are paid by all revenues defies rational distinction. The growth of the payroll tax to a level where it rivals, and for many in the lower-income brackets exceeds, the personal income tax may raise some consciousness of this anomaly. But most tragically, with one-tenth of our work force unemployed, why penalize an employer who hires and the worker who takes a job? Fiscal legislators have long recognized the need for special incentives to invest, save, conserve through depreciations, fast write-offs, depletion allowances, and all the other special advantages enjoyed by those with the means to find and use them. How about an equal break for working, or for employing labor, at least to the extent now available for investing in plant and other capital equipment? Or would it be too much to ask that the owners of natural resources, land, minerals and other rights derived from the public, pay the rest of us back for those privileges.

Whether we are starving or pampering either our military or our elderly may well be debated by the powerful constituencies each can muster. All can agree, however, that a special tax on employment is as inappropriate for our social as it is for our national security, however they are labelled in their respective debates.

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