

Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association

Resolution to Save Social Security

ADOPTED AT RRA CONVENTION, MARCH 15, 2005

submitted by Toba Spitzer & Jeremy Schwartz, 2/15/05.

(We acknowledge with appreciation the influence of the 1999 resolution of the UAHC on Social Security.)

BACKGROUND

Judaism holds as its social ideal the covenantal society, in which individual members are obligated to the well-being of the community and the community is obligated to care for the individual. This ideal is reflected in Jewish economic teachings. The Biblical perspective on ownership emphasizes that we are stewards of the property in our possession rather than its owner; the real owner of property—and all real wealth—is its Creator (“*Ladonay ha’aretz umelo’o*; the earth and all that is in it belong to God,” Psalms 24:1). Further, the blessing of economic abundance is contingent upon covenantal obligations that include care for those without access to wealth. Jewish tradition holds that the rights of property ownership are tempered by the obligation to support the community in general as well as to care for those members of the community who are most in need, typified by the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

The Social Security program is a cornerstone of the covenantal principle in American society. Far more than a retirement benefits program, it embodies the Biblical teachings of intergenerational responsibility and support. For over sixty years, Social Security has been the main avenue through which the United States has assured a reasonable income for its retired workers and their families, as well as for those who have lost family income due to the death or disability of a worker. Social Security is a social insurance program and a crucial safety net for some of those most vulnerable in our society. Poverty rates among the elderly have fallen from an estimated 50% in 1935 to around 11% today. Over two-thirds of elderly Social Security beneficiaries receive more than half their income from Social Security, and for a third of this group, Social Security provides at least 90% of their income. By providing such significant support to so many retirees and elderly citizens, the Social Security program reflects the Biblical mandate to give proper honor to the elderly (Leviticus 19:32) and to care for the widow (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 14:29; Deuteronomy 24:17-19).

The Bush Administration is claiming that Social Security is in “crisis” and will soon be unable to meet its obligations, but these claims are not substantiated by facts. Conservative estimates by the Social Security trustees and the Congressional Budget Office project that full benefits can be paid out for the next 40 or 50 years, at which point scheduled benefits (assuming no changes to the system) would fall to approximately 75%. Considering a 75-year time horizon, the Social Security trustees estimate that the shortfall under their “intermediate” scenario is \$3.7 trillion (in present value). If one-third of the Bush Administration’s tax cuts were rolled back and that money were deposited into the Social Security trust fund, the entire 75-year shortfall would disappear.

The Bush Administration is proposing a new system of private accounts for workers born in 1965 or after as the way to “save” Social Security. Such accounts would not address the currently projected Social Security shortfall in any way. Rather, the President’s proposal would address this shortfall by reducing benefits. The costs associated with administering and transitioning to private accounts are enormous and would add substantially to the national debt, while likely reducing, not increasing, the benefits paid out to most retirees, especially those most in need.

There are a number of alternative approaches to achieving Social Security solvency, including raising revenues by a variety of mechanisms, investing a portion of the current trust fund in a stock index fund, and increasing the number of years of earnings that are considered. It is important to note that for the past two thousand years Jewish communities have taxed their members in order to maintain vital communal functions and to provide care for those unable to work and others in need. This financial aspect of covenantal responsibility is a fundamental tenet of Jewish law and tradition.

Therefore, be it resolved that the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association opposes all efforts to weaken or dismantle Social Security as a federal social insurance program that provides for the elderly, widows and widowers, orphans, and people with disabilities.

Be it further resolved that the RRA opposes the replacement of Social Security retirement benefits with private accounts, in whole or in part, and opposes any diversion of funds from other vital social programs to address the solvency of Social Security.

Be it further resolved that the RRA supports maintaining the progressive nature of Social Security benefits, whereby low- and middle-income beneficiaries receive a proportionally greater amount of benefits relative to their lifetime earnings.

Be it further resolved that the RRA, in accord with Jewish tradition, views taxation as a legitimate and necessary method of paying for our communal obligations carried out by means of government programs. In particular, we support the levying of sufficient taxes to ensure the solvency of Social Security as a social insurance program that will support the elderly, disabled, widowed, and orphaned at a level consistent with human dignity and communal obligation. Such revenues might be raised through a variety of means including: raising the cap on taxable wages above its current level; imposing a new, smaller payroll tax on all earnings above the maximum; reinstating the estate tax; or rolling back the 2001 and 2003 tax cuts.

Be it further resolved that this resolution will be distributed to all members of the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, to the relevant officials in the Bush Administration, to the media, and to organizations working to save Social Security. This resolution should also be publicized throughout the Reconstructionist movement.

Be it further resolved that the RRA empowers the RRA Executive Director and members of the RRA Board to speak out publicly on its behalf on this issue, and encourages them to do so.