

# Hurting Seniors: The Attack on Social Security

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*[This is part 6 of an article on the power of right-wing think tanks. See also [part one](#), [part two](#), [part three](#), [part four](#), and [part five](#).]*

Recent events provide a compelling case study of how this process works. Conservatives have wanted to get rid of Social Security for years. The most successful anti-poverty program in history, it clearly shows how the government can be used to help people — anathema to conservative ideology. Now, with a secure lock on government, is their time to strike. As a White House deputy wrote in a memo that was later leaked, “For the first time in six decades, the Social Security battle is one we can win — and in doing so, we can help transform the political and philosophical landscape of the country.”†

There’s extremely strong public support for Social Security — conservatives could certainly never just come out and say they wanted to end it — so their plan is to deceive the public: First, persuade people that Social Security is facing some sort of crisis and won’t be around for the next generation. Second, convince them to begin replacing Social Security with a privatized version. Privatization, the logic goes, will naturally keep increasing until all of Social Security is eliminated. The only problem is that Social Security isn’t facing a crisis and any form of privatization, which would require both paying out to existing retirees and saving away money for the private accounts of the current generation, would worsen whatever financial problems Social Security does have.†

But think tanks have been preparing for this moment for years, floating privatization plans and doing their best to persuade the media that Social Security was in imminent danger. So when the Bush administration started up their anti-Social Security campaign, the media knew exactly what to say.

CBS, for example, presented a segment featuring man-on-the-street Tad DeHaven. “I don’t expect to get anything from Social Security, OK?” said young DeHaven. “It’s not going to be there—that’s my assumption.” DeHaven had good reason to say these things: for years, he’s been one of the leading Republican activists in the fight to get rid of Social Security. CBS never mentioned the connection.†

A later CBS report boosted fears that Social Security was going bankrupt by displaying a graphic on the screen that read “2042: Insolvent = 0 benefits??” [*sic*] (“In 2042, Social Security will become insolvent, and today’s young workers risk losing their benefits,” a voiceover explained.) But this just isn’t true: even the pessimistic Social Security Administration concedes that by 2042 Social

Security will be able to pay nearly 80% of scheduled benefits, which is still far more than what it pays out today.†

Other networks were no better. NBC's report feature quotes from Bush saying the system would go "flat bust" and an interview with a Heritage Foundation scholar — identified only as a "social security expert" — but allowed no critics to contradict their claims.† Meanwhile, an ABC report claimed "One thing everyone agrees on, the Social Security system as it exists now won't be able to afford those payments for long after the Wilsons retire." In fact, it's quite the opposite: even the most pessimistic predictions say that Social Security will be fine until the Wilsons are statistically dead. Again, no critics got a voice.†

*Next:* Part 7: [Fighting Back](#)