

Political Potential of Senior Citizens

Politicians in Congress are quite aware of the growing number of senior citizens and, eye their votes with increasing concern. Some senators are making a specialty of this concern and are readying bills of all kinds for various federal benefits.

But while such politicians are accurate in recognizing the political potential of these voters, they assume all too glibly that the only concern of a person over 65 is to get handouts from the government.

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The fact can easily be proved that a major proportion of those over 65 neither are in need of nor want support by the government. A realistic political leader, such as a candidate for President, would appeal to that majority. They are more interested in conserving what they have than in getting something for nothing.

The stereotype of the so-called problem of the aged, duly shown last week on the cover of a magazine, is a group of elderly, stupid-looking gents drowsing on a bench and playing at horseshoes in the Florida sun. This is a quite false representation of the 16 million Americans over 65.

A true portrayal could be approached by a compilation of the property interests of the 16 million, together with a consideration of values wasted in our system which denies useful work to so many who are perfectly able to make a great contribution to the nation's welfare.

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As Dr. Edward L. Bortz told a congressional committee last year, people not only are living longer, but are staying young longer. He said: "A curious paradox faces society today . . . people are living longer. At the same time, outmoded practices on the part of industry, labor, government are forcing large groups out of useful occupations.

"This is taking place at a time when through years of practice, study, knowledge and experience, an individual is capable of the best performance of his entire life . . . Certainly the solvent older individual who is a contributing rather than a

noncontributing member of the community is an asset of first importance."

We should consider the distinction between mere age and disability. Government and private welfare can and should provide for the genuinely disabled and the utterly incompetent. But a greater and greater proportion of those past 60 are not disabled or incompetent.

They are being forced by labor contracts into early retirement. Corporation and other employers insist upon arbitrary retirement at an age limit which was created in the distant past. In some lines such as advertising salesmanship and newspapering, it is getting harder and harder for a man over 50 to get a new job.

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It is true that a powerful political case against inflation could be made by showing the purely material interests of retired or semi-retired people. But there are values other than the material to support such an appeal.

One of the most terrible tolls taken is the destruction of the happiness and usefulness of people who are told by society that they are dispensable when, in fact, they are probably abler, wiser, and more capable of productivity than ever before. The best appeal to senior citizens must not be limited to saving their savings but to helping them save themselves.

The voting potential of the 16 million past 65 is, allowing for some overlapping, greater than that of the farmers and almost as great as that of union members. But they lack organization. Perhaps they will never be organized.

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But they could be summoned to political action by real political leadership. They have what is indispensable for political action — time on their hands and a capacity for organization and persuasion. They have not only their own votes but the capacity to mobilize others.

Their interests as well as the interests of the nation in sound money and solvency can be furthered by their efforts. They are a massive political potential, waiting for real leadership.