

THE HILL



OP-ED

Burying their heads in the sand of obstructionism

By Sen. Judd Gregg (R-N.H.)

Last month the Senate Budget Committee passed a package of initiatives, the Stop Over-Spending Act (S. 3521), designed to put our financial house in order and make our government affordable for its citizens, especially the younger people who will be working to support the next generation as it retires.

This package has been grossly misrepresented by the other side of the aisle. They have taken out the bloody shirt of Social Security, waved it at this package in a totally irresponsible manner and shown their unwillingness to step up and debate this issue honestly. That's not governance. That's simply obstructionism for the sake of political gain.

I think it's appropriate to point out what the facts are, versus what they believe the politics should be.

The facts are rather startling. As we face the impending retirement of the baby-boom generation, the largest generation in our history, the cost of supporting the baby boomers that will fall on our children and grandchildren is astronomical. We cannot put obligations on the books that will force the next generation to pay so much in taxes that they will not be able to enjoy the same quality of life that we do. It's not fair to them.

So we tried to address this not by policy changes but by putting in place processes that will force the public policymakers of the legislative and the executive branches to face the existing facts and figures.

And how did the other side of the aisle react? Their immediate reaction was to attack this proposal, even though there is no policy attached to it. It simply has processes that forces policy to occur, and no specific policy at that.

Their response was to attack this proposal as an attack on Social Security — a grossly inaccurate, irresponsible and inappropriate charge made for the purposes of political gain. It seems that the other side of the aisle believes that our children should be faced with a burden that they cannot possibly afford, rather than act now to address the needs of our children, specifically the affordability of the government.

For example, on the bill's creation of a Commission on Entitlement Solvency, the other side has grossly misrepresented the facts and then dusted off the scare tactic of dismantling Social Security.

The commission represents a bipartisan approach to address the well-known fact that the entitlements programs are growing at an unsustainable rate. We have obligations to retirees that will cost \$65 trillion more than the government's income under the present projections. The commission's only instruction is to ensure the solvency of the Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid programs.

If put in place today, the commission would consist of eight Republicans and seven Democrats. Furthermore, it takes two-thirds of the commission — a bipartisan supermajority — to put together a report to be able to be sent to the Senate under expedited procedures, procedures that ensure 50 hours of debate. The legislative provisions in the report can be amended by Democrat and Republican alike. Finally and most notably, it would take 60 votes to pass the report — a bipartisan supermajority of the Senate.

I would like to see this debate on the floor and discuss the issue of paygo — or “taxgo,” as I like to call it, which is one of the proposals from the other side of the aisle. If they want to raise taxes, we should debate that. But no, their response is that this is going to savage, undermine and privatize Social Security — all the words that their pollsters have told them to use to try to get reelected.

What actually is going to be the downfall of Social Security is our generation retiring and our children being unable to cover the massive cost of those benefits. Not only will the program be insolvent but our children are going to be out of luck when they would like to buy a house. Or send their kids to college. Or try to live the good life we've had.

They won't be able to afford it because we will have put an enormous tax burden on them. Because we, during our terms of office, are unwilling to be responsible and address these issues.

The proposal we brought forward is very simple, very responsible, and an attempt to get at the essence of the problem. There is no irresponsibility in this proposal. The irresponsibility is on the other side of the aisle, which has buried its head in the sand of obstructionism.

We are being responsible with the Stop Over-Spending Act, a package that would try to reverse the direction in which we're inevitably heading. However, if we stay on our current course and do nothing, we will eliminate the capacity of our children to afford their government.

I hope we can have an honest, factual debate about the need for budget reform and allow members of the Senate to vote on the merits of this proposal, instead of playing election-year politics.

Gregg is chairman of the Budget Committee.