

Senator Ron Wyden
Ranking Member, Senate Committee on Finance

Testimony before the House Ways & Means Subcommittee on Social Security
Hearing on Saving our Social Security Now
September 24, 2020

Chairman Larson, Ranking Member Reed, thank you for having me here today to testify about saving Social Security, which is an issue that's been near and dear to me ever since my days as the co-director of the Oregon Grey Panthers. There's a lot to talk about today when it comes to threats this vital program faces, but I promise not to filibuster the discussion.

I've seen a lot of tonedeaf moments in the Trump administration, but nothing quite compares to the billionaire president announcing from the ballroom of his private golf club to a nation enduring mass death and economic collapse that his big rescue plan is to steal from Social Security.

It was Saturday, August 8th, the president was fresh off the links, and it was an out-of-touch scene for the history books. The specific policy the president proposed was a payroll tax deferral through 2020. Earlier this year he'd campaigned for a payroll tax holiday, but he didn't have much of any support in Congress.

At best, what the president is talking about comes down to shifting people's tax payments around instead of giving them needed financial support. It's exactly the kind of economic gimmick you'd expect from a real estate mogul known for stiffing his contractors out of money he owed them. His proposal amounts to selling people their own money, and as a deferral, the debt will come due in 2021 when people get hit with an additional tax bill. That's why hardly any major employers have taken Trump up on this offer.

That's the best case scenario for this dud of a proposal. A tax deferral juicing people's paychecks for a few months at most. But the president made it clear in his ballroom speech that he doesn't want to stop with a temporary deferral. He said, "If I'm victorious on November 3rd, I plan to forgive these taxes and make permanent cuts to the payroll tax."

With a permanent payroll tax cut the president revealed that what he's after is a permanent cut in Social Security funding. It wasn't just a misquote because he doubled down a few days later. During an August 10th press conference he said that if he wins reelection, his goal is "terminating" Social Security's funding source.

According to the chief actuary of Social Security, if Congress were to go along with a plan to eliminate payroll taxes, you'd exhaust traditional Social Security benefits by the middle of 2023. You'd exhaust disability benefits by the middle of 2021. So what the president is talking about endangers benefits for people who are on Social Security right now and all those who plan on signing up anytime soon.

Now, in the aftermath of the president blurting out this plan to devastate Social Security, the administration has obviously scrambled to walk it all back and clean up the record with a different story. They want the American people to believe Donald Trump and Republicans in Congress pose no danger to Social Security, but they have zero credibility on this issue.

In 2016 Trump said he'd never cut Medicaid, another bedrock safety net program tens of millions of Americans rely on every day. In 2017 he turned around and tried to cut it by \$800 billion. If you can't trust him on cuts to Medicaid, why can you trust him on Social Security?

When I say that Donald Trump wants Social Security cuts, you do not have to take my word for it. Each Trump budget proposed billions in cuts to Social Security. Democrats blocked those cuts. Trump also said it earlier this year! He was asked in Davos, Switzerland whether he would cut programs like Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, and he said yes.

A few months later he was asked in a Fox News town hall about Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, and he said "Oh we'll be cutting..."

The bottom line is that Donald Trump is the biggest danger there is to people's Social Security benefits.

The committee will probably hear some rhetorical acrobatics today denying that's the case -- stuff that sounds a lot like administration officials trying to clean up after the president's messes. But here's my question: if Trump doesn't want to cut Social Security, then why does he keep saying he does?

He said it in Davos. He said it on Fox News. He said it in his private golf club ballroom, when he announced his plan to bankrupt Social Security's trust fund. I think Americans ought to take him at his word.

Thank you, Chairman Larson.