Lessons from FDR: When the Right Cries Wolf, Bite Back

Alf Landon, the Kansas governor running as the Republican Party's 1936 presidential candidate, called it a "fraud on the working man" and "a cruel hoax." The New York Times, in an editorial, said it was "ill-considered" and "very questionable." Harper Sibley, the president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, warned that it would result in "more unemployment in the future, killing the goose that lays the golden eggs."

Congressman John Taber, a Republican from New York, proclaimed that "Never in the history of the world has any measure been brought here so insidiously designed as to prevent business recovery, to enslave workers and to prevent any possibility of the employers providing work for the people." His New York colleague, GOP Congressman Daniel Reed, warned that if it passed "the lash of the dictator will be felt." The American Medical Association denounced it as a "compulsory socialistic tax." Silas Strawn, former president of both the American Bar Association and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, described it as "economically preposterous and legally indefensible." It was, he said, part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's attempt to "Sovietize the country."

What was this threat to American prosperity, freedom, and democracy they were all decrying? It was Social Security, which President Roosevelt signed into law on August 14, 1935 -- 75 years ago.

At the time, the opponents of Social Security were not right-wing lunatics (the Depression-era cousins of today's Tea Party), but rather the business establishment and the mainstream of the Republican Party.

In the early years of the Depression, more than half of America's elderly lived in poverty. But most business leaders and conservatives considered the very idea that government had a moral responsibility to help senior citizens retire with dignity to be outrageously radical, a dangerous trampling of individual liberty.

In addition to ideological objections, opponents had economic ones. They predicted that the new Social Security tax would bankrupt the country and make it impossible to bring the economy out of the recession. The powerful National Association of Manufacturers said the "so-called Social Security will mean industrial in-security." Senator Daniel Hastings (R-Del) predicted that Social Security would "end the progress of a great country and bring its people to the level of the average European."

Opponents argued that Social Security was impractical, utopian, un-American, radical, and socialistic.

As the former Governor of New York, Roosevelt knew that the chambers of commerce, manufacturers associations, and other business groups had opposed the most important pieces of social legislation on that state's books, including the factory inspection law (passed as a result of the 1911 Triangle Shirt Waist factory fire that killed 146 women), the law limiting the hours of labor for women to fifty-four a week, unemployment insurance, pensions for the elderly, and public works projects to put people back to work.

Once elected President, FDR viewed Social Security as part of his broader New Deal effort to humanize capitalism. Born to privilege, he understood that many business groups and wealthy people considered him a traitor to his class. They were, he thought, greedy, unenlightened, and on the wrong side of history. He was determined to take them on.

FDR anticipated the attacks on his Social Security proposal and outmaneuvered the opponents. He used his bully pulpit, including several "fireside chats" on the radio, to carefully explain why Social Security was a good idea and its the opponents were misguided.

"A few timid people, who fear progress, will try to give you new and strange names for what we are doing," he explain in his fireside chat in June 1934. "Sometimes they will call it "Fascism", sometimes "Communism", sometimes "Regimentation", sometimes "Socialism". But, in so doing, they are trying to make very complex and theoretical something that is really very simple and very practical. I believe in practical explanations and in practical policies. I believe that what we are doing today is a necessary fulfillment of what Americans have always been doing -- a fulfillment of old and tested American ideals."

In 1935, President Roosevelt and the Democratic majority in Congress enacted Social Security. Upon signing the legislation, FDR said: "We can never insure one hundred percent of the population against one hundred percent of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job and against poverty-ridden old age...It is, in short, a law that will take care of human needs and at the same time provide the United States an economic structure of vastly greater soundness."

Most Americans agreed. Running for re-election the next year, FDR beat Landon by a 60.8% to 36.6% landslide.

Today, Social Security insures families against the loss of income caused by retirement, disability, or death. Social Security
Peter Dreier: Lessons from FDR: When the Right Cries Wolf, Bi...

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