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Ride along enclosed.



Tweaking the System

SOME YEARS AGO IN A FORMER LIFE, I worked as a reporter in the tiny Washington bureau of *Modern Maturity*, then the flagship magazine of the American Association of Retired Persons (now known simply by its acronym, AARP).

During my time there, I wrote a lot of stories about pensions, Medicare, and Social Security. (So many that when I left that job, I exulted in the thought that I would never again have to write about Social Security. Isn't it funny how life works out?) Less than a decade out of college when I started, I was only passingly conversant in how pensions worked, blasé about my own retirement (I couldn't imagine being 40, much less 65), and not a little shocked (though I covered it well) to discover in an early discussion with a colleague that my FICA taxes weren't going into an account with my name on it but rather flowing out almost immediately in the form of benefits to my grandparents and their cohort (in my defense, at least I wasn't foolish enough to imagine a lockbox). I also remember thinking that the 1983 revisions to Social Security that I was writing about would pretty much fix the system for a long time to come.

I couldn't have been more wrong. And while I believe that I'm pretty likely to pick up a benefit that looks a lot like the one that my parents currently enjoy (although I'll be a little older than they were when I can begin to draw on it), I'm not so sure about the form of benefits that my kids will see. Clearly, change is coming.

This isn't necessarily a bad thing. And it's certainly not unprecedented. Social Security

was begun as a great social experiment by a country in distress, and the ink had barely dried on the original legislation before the tweaking began. Starting in 1939 and every decade thereafter (with some time out for the prosecution of World War II), the program has been subject to amendment and revision.

In this issue of *Contingencies*, four actuaries offer their suggestions for further tweaks. They each bring a different perspective to the discussion, but Tom Terry, Anna Rappaport, Ken Buffin, and A. Haeworth Robertson share a common background in their actuarial training and experience. They join a long line of actuaries who have turned their professional skills to shaping, protecting, and improving Social Security, either within the system (like Robertson, who served as the system's chief actuary from 1975 to 1978) or from the outside by advising legislators, other policymakers, and the general public.

I'm writing this in September, and it's impossible to predict who the new president will be when you read it in November. But chances are that Social Security reform will be on the short list of things to tackle by whichever new administration comes into office. And, as they have from the beginning, actuaries are bound to be an important part of that process.

I personally couldn't be happier. Even if it means that many more articles about Social Security await my editorial eye down the line. ●

Linda Mallon